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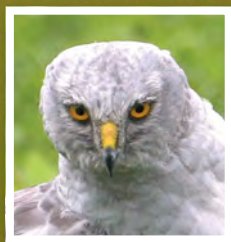
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ADVISORY PANEL

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SWALLOW BY E FELLOWES (WWW.BTO.ORG)



"IT doesn't matter who you
vote for, the government
always gets in." That famous
quote may seem unduly
defeatist, but when it comes
to the environment there is

more than a ring of truth about it. In the
run-up to the general election, environmental
issues have barely figured in TV debates and
interviews with party leaders and candidates,
and are clearly not considered a major
battleground for votes. With the notable
exception of the Greens, most parties have
said little on the subject, and you could
be forgiven for thinking that by and large
politicians don't devote much time to thinking
about the environment or how to conserve
biodiversity.

This is not just an issue in the UK, but
a global problem, too. In 2010 the world's
governments undertook to protect 17 per cent
of land and 10 per cent of sea by 2020, but
a new study has found progress well behind
target, with one third of all key sites still

lacking any form of protection. It seems that
long-term preservation of the planet is not a
priority for short-term governments and the
prospect of re-election. Tax cuts win votes,
protected areas don't.

Perhaps that's to be expected. In the UK,
big issues like austerity and the NHS are
bound to dominate the debate, and parties
should be assessed on their policies on a range
of issues, not just one. But the environment
generally, and birds specifically, matter hugely
to people like us, and if we don't factor them
into the voting process, who will? To try and
redress this imbalance in coverage and help
you make an informed voting decision on
2 May, we've put together a special election
guide (pages 36-39) to outline the views and
policies of all parties on conservation and
the environment. It makes interesting and
sometimes surprising reading – use it to help
you make the right decision on election day.

Dominic Mitchell

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Politics affects every aspect of our lives,
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Osprey has made a remarkable comeback to Britain, and in its strongholds is a tourist attraction, allowing for stunning photos.

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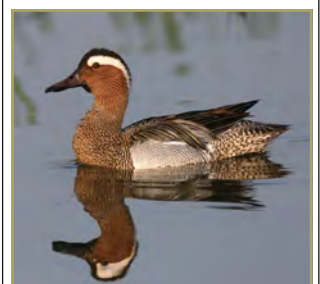


NIGHTINGALE BY MICHAEL DURHAM

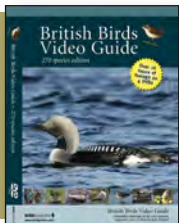
25 May is an excellent month to go for a 'big day', and north Norfolk

provides a fantastic itinerary for finding birds, with further great days detailed for Dorset, Kent, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Aberdeenshire.

Where to watch birds



GARGANEY BY CHRIS VAN RIJSWIJK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)



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Making a splash



As readers of March's feature on Britain's reintroduced birds will know (see *Birdwatch* 273: 36-40), Osprey has staged a remarkable comeback since the species first recolonised in the 1950s. Boosted by reintroductions – most notably at Rutland Water, Leicestershire – this impressive raptor is now expected to be seen annually along Britain's flyways, on its way back from wintering grounds in West Africa.

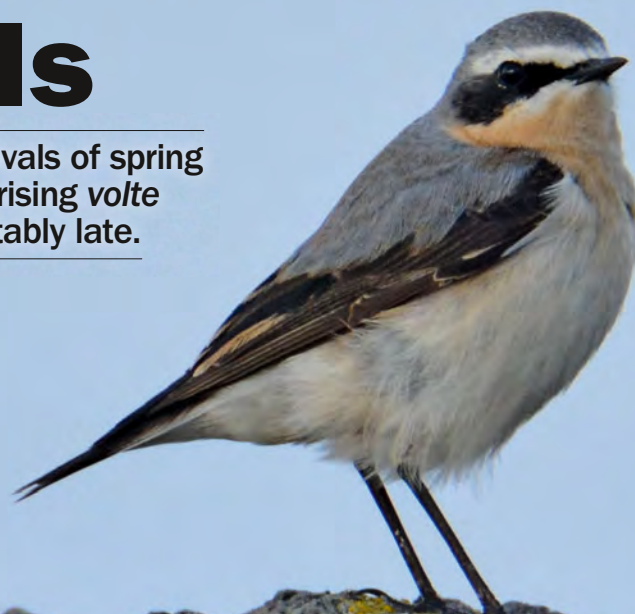
The Rutland birds have become one of the biggest tourist attractions in the area, providing a much needed fillip for the local economy. However, the persecution which saw Ospreys become lost to Britain in the late 19th century is not entirely over – in recent years a total of three birds disappeared from the area in suspicious circumstances, according to police, and were believed possibly to have been shot.

Despite such drawbacks, there is no denying the popularity of the species, or the drama of the sight of these magnificent raptors as they hunt. ■



Late arrivals

After the almost unprecedented early arrivals of spring migrants last year, 2015 has seen a surprising *volte face*, with many regular species being notably late.



Northern Wheatears began arriving bang on time this year, and by 28 March this fine spring male had reached as far north as Machrihanish, Argyll, though numbers were still low overall.

FAUSTO RICCIONI

Spring migrants: March 2015

“WHAT a difference a year makes” we wrote last May (see *Birdwatch* 263: 10-11), referring to the almost unprecedented early arrival dates of most of our summer visitors this time last year. The phrase takes on irony now, as many of our breeding migrants were contrastingly tardy this spring (see table opposite).

Arrival dates of summer migrants have been showing a general trend of getting earlier, a trait usually attributed to the cumulative effects of climate change, but last year's figures were strikingly premature. The dates this year have generally been a little early compared to the average, but in several cases are very late, with some species not having appeared in Britain at all at the time of writing: not too surprising in the case of Little and Black Terns, but there should have been a Common Swift by early April.

Osprey and Hobby, usually about a month apart, turned up in

tandem this year.

However, the ever reliable Little Ringed Plover arrived like clockwork on 8 March both years running. Our regular ‘white tern’ species came on the same date, too, with both Arctic and Common being earlier than average, but the latter later than in 2014. Those traditional augurs of spring, Common Cuckoo and European Turtle Dove, were wildly disparate in their arrivals, with the brood parasite being seen precisely on its average date and the purring dove of the power lines actually arriving earlier than usual (there was also an apparently overwintering bird).

The prolonged slow start to spring was most apparent among the passerines. Sand Martin was a couple of weeks late this year, but the other common hirundines were pretty much spot on. Chats were all about a week and a half late, apart from Northern Wheatear, which managed to arrive on exactly the same date



ED O'HARA

Common Chiffchaff is a scarce wintering bird in Britain and Ireland, but in March increases of birds that have wintered to the south are very noticeable as they start singing. This bird was in Armagh on 5 April.



Small numbers of Blackcaps from central Europe overwinter in Britain, but by March our own breeding birds start returning, making it difficult to tell which population this individual in Anlaby, East Yorkshire, actually belongs to.

NIGEL GENN



Another species that overwinters in small numbers is Firecrest, but it is also an early migrant. This bird was at Old Fall Plantation, Flamborough, East Yorkshire in early April.



PAUL LATHBURY

Garganey is one of the few summer migrants which often travels as a pair, such as these birds at Seeswood Pool, Warwickshire, on 5 April. The species is one of the most prized spring ticks for patch birders.

Species	Average arrival date (from BTO BirdTrack)	Earliest 2014 arrival	Earliest 2015 arrival
Osprey	11 April	25 February	1 April
Hobby	15 April	25 March	1 April
Little Ringed Plover	20 March	8 March	8 March
Common Tern	7 April	18 March	29 March
Arctic Tern	23 April	2 April	29 March
Little Tern	12 April	6 April	–
Black Tern	24 April	4 April	–
European Turtle Dove	17 April	9 March	7 March
Common Cuckoo	4 April	12 March	4 April
Common Swift	18 April	14 March	–
Wryneck	27 April	9 March	7 April
Sand Martin	17 March	22 February	6 March
Swallow	23 March	9 March	9 March
House Martin	31 March	10 March	8 March
Tree Pipit	31 March	12 March	24 March
Yellow Wagtail	2 April	9 March	25 January
Nightingale	16 April	24 March	3 April
Common Redstart	5 April	24 March	5 April
Whinchat	17 April	26 March	7 April
Northern Wheatear	12 March	2 March	2 March
Ring Ouzel	30 March	5 March	24 January
Grasshopper Warbler	14 April	4 March	–
Sedge Warbler	9 April	23 March	30 March
Reed Warbler	16 April	28 March	1 April
Lesser Whitethroat	18 April	28 March	28 March
Common Whitethroat	11 April	17 March	31 March
Garden Warbler	13 April	10 March	–
Willow Warbler	26 March	16 March	14 March
Pied Flycatcher	15 April	1 April	–

Table: a comparison of BTO BirdTrack average arrival dates with the first records of each summer migrant for 2014 and 2015 from www.BirdGuides.com.

as last year – 2 March. Ring Ouzel was possible very early, but this species' precise figures are often blurred by the habit of one or two individuals to linger from the previous year. Sedge and Reed Warblers were also up to a week late, though a lone Willow Warbler actually arrived early this year.

Of course, there are a few species that buck this year's trend. Between one and three individuals of a few species, usually first-winter birds, are

known to have overwintered, such as Swallow, Ring Ouzel, Reed and Willow Warblers, and Common and Lesser Whitethroats. Winter individuals of this last species sometimes prove to be of one of the 'eastern' forms, which may also have been the case for the Yellow Wagtail seen on the Isle of Wight on 25 January.

The delays down the flyway were also highlighted by the lack of a heavyweight rare migrant in early spring, though a Black-winged Stilt showed up in Abbotsbury, Dorset, on 3 April. ■



KATIE HORROCKS

The first rare overshooting species of the spring was this Black-winged Stilt at Abbotsbury, Dorset, photographed by 15-year-old Katie Horrocks on 4 April; the bird was still present as we went to press.

FINDER'S REPORT

Eagle over Essex

Neil Higginson got the surprise of his life when a huge raptor hove into view during a dawn owl photography session.

White-tailed Eagle: North Fambridge, Essex and various sites in Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk, 14-29 March 2015

I had been putting in the hours at my local patch of Blue House Farm EWT and getting some reasonable Barn Owl shots, after having learned their hunting patterns. I promised my uncle I would meet him over at the reserve at first light and he would, too, have the opportunity to photograph some owls. I arrived there at 5.45 am, found that he was already there and made my way to the hide. The sky was just starting to look pink and I was hoping we would get some nice backlit shots.

As I arrived at the hide there was another man there whom I had met the previous week, when he had missed sunrise shots of the owl, and so he had made sure he got there earlier.

We had been there for about 10 minutes when one of the owls emerged from its roost and started quartering the reedbeds. It was still too distant and dark for a decent shot, but I explained that it would make its way over soon. It was extremely cold in the hide and the sun was stuck behind a band of low cloud.

At about 6.10 am we were chatting away, watching and waiting, when from behind us a couple of birds rocketed past the hide followed by what has traditionally and accurately been described as a 'flying barn door'. Everything in the vicinity was sent skywards: geese, ducks, harriers and corvids. "What the hell was that?" we all said. "I think it was a buzzard" said the other guy. "That was no buzzard, it's far



NEIL HIGGINSON

Appearing shortly after dawn, the White-tailed Eagle soon drew the attention of the local Carrion Crows, which harassed it as they might any other visiting raptor, despite its imposing size.

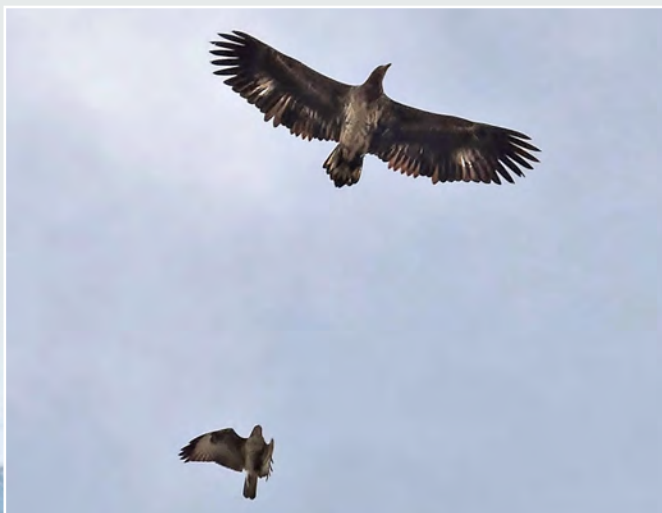
NEIL HIGGINSON

NEIL HIGGINSON



The White-tailed Eagle seemed capable of disturbing any of the great numbers of other species using the marshes, including the feral Greylag Geese (left) and Oystercatchers (top). Its presence made the Essex countryside almost resemble the marshes of central Europe or prehistoric southern England.

CHARLES CUTHBERT



Roaming East Anglia for the duration, the White-tailed Eagle was made most unwelcome by the local birds, including this Common Buzzard (bottom) at Horsey, Norfolk, on 22nd.

too big," I said. "It looks like an eagle."

I racked my brains, wondering if it could be a captive bird such as the vulture that had recently escaped from Tropical Wings Zoo in South Woodham Ferrers. However, after zooming in on the shots we had taken, we decided it was definitely an eagle from the shape of its beak.

As there were no jesses, we thought it was probably not an escape. There was a fair amount of white in its plumage and on the tail, though as it was not completely white I suspected it might be juvenile. I submitted a screenshot from my camera to the news services asking for an identification and set about

Googling juvenile eagles. It definitely looked like a young White-tailed Eagle, but as the sun came up and it flew it showed a golden tinge. We could now see that it was definitely a juvenile 'WTE', and it then flew off.

Another guy turned up and asked if anything was about; we told him, and he looked at us in disbelief. After I showed him the back of the camera shots he was gobsmacked, and then the bird returned. Cameras were all snapping away, and while reviewing the shots the eagle was actually seen trying to take a Barn Owl. For the next hour and a half it sat on posts and made a few failed hunting attempts. By this time, around 9 am, Twitter had started going mad and the news services had confirmed that it was a second-winter White-tailed Eagle. We had forgotten all about the owls and harriers. It finally disappeared about 9.10 am, rising in the thermals and soaring off north towards Stow Maries.

It just goes to show you that you never know what you might see if you put in the time and effort.

• The eagle continued to roam around East Anglia until almost the end of the month, being noted at various points around the coast until its last reported appearance at East Dereham, Norfolk, on the evening of 29th. Another (juvenile) bird apparently not from the reintroduction project in Scotland was seen at various sites in Co Durham from 8 March into April. ■

A passing female Marsh Harrier (top) was dwarfed by the imperious presence and sheer bulk of the eagle, as it surveyed the misty post-dawn Essex hinterland. However, after about an hour and a half there seemed little to hold the bird in place.

Spring Desert

Usually one of the latest arriving vagrants of the autumn, recent years have seen a few spring Desert Wheatears, and this March produced another.

Desert Wheatear: Porth Askin, St Agnes, Scilly, 21-26 March 2015

The merging of the black throat with the black of the wing feathers is a clear difference between Desert Wheatear, like this first-summer male at Porth Askin, and Black-eared Wheatear, which has been known very rarely to turn up in late spring.



AFTER the autumn's minor influx of Desert Wheatears (see *Birdwatch* 271: 10-11), it might perhaps be unsurprising that one might survive and even pass through again, particularly if it came from one of the eastern populations, as at least a few of the British vagrants do.

Certainly the appearance of a cracking moulting first-winter male on Scilly on 21 March would imply this; was it was attempting to find its way back to its eastern home turf, after becoming disorientated the previous year during its post-fledging dispersal?

However, we know that some of our records also originate in North Africa, being individuals of the subspecies *homochroa*, so it is just as possible that this bird is an early overshoot, attempting to reach its Moroccan breeding grounds, though as a first-summer it may not be quite ready to reproduce yet. Even so, the bird was reported to be singing fairly frequently, and so was clearly getting 'in the mood'.

Found by Bob Dawson, the wheatear was the fourth for the bird-blessed isles, and attracted a crowd of about 15 locals on its first day. Spring had potentially registered its best bird before hardly any of the regular migrants had even arrived.

Birds have been known to attempt to overwinter in Britain, most recently from 4



The Siberian Stonechat-like black underwing coverts are a little-appreciated feature of Desert Wheatear, but can be seen clearly in this photograph of the confiding Scilly bird.



Spring Desert Wheatears are not unprecedented; this well-twitched first-summer male was present in Greater Manchester, at Orlam on 8-9 March 2007.

December 2011-3 January 2012 at Newbiggin-upon-Sea, Northumberland. However, with Scilly being rather well watched, it is unlikely that the bird was present much before it was found. The sandy analogue of the St Agnes beach seems to have been desert-like enough to hold it for six days before it disappeared.

There have been seven other spring records, all in March or early April, and all, interestingly, but currently inexplicably, first-winter/summer males.

On top of this, most of the spring records have been since 1989, though there has also been a notable general increase in records of the species in the last few decades. Thus a species which birders usually rely upon to liven up the end of migration has now provided a welcome early spring bonus on Scilly. ■

STATS & FACTS

First recorded: Gartmorn Dam, Upper Forth, 26 November 1880

Last recorded: Severn Beach, Gloucestershire, 11-14 December 2013

Previous British records: 133, though at least six more are being considered by the Rarities Committee from last autumn.

Previous Irish records: 8

Mega rating: ★★★★★

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Rarities: March 2015

Rarities stick around



Notable new arrivals were thin on the ground, reports **Josh Jones**, but there were enough long-staying birds to keep the crowds happy.



A welcome spring surprise was this first-summer Desert Wheatear on St Agnes, Scilly, which spent 21-26 March behaving very confidently on the shore at Port Askin.

KRIS WEBB

After a promising start to 2015, there can be no denying that the highlights page for March looks a little pause. Thankfully, a series of lingering rarities ensured that proceedings didn't become deathly quiet on BirdGuides.com throughout the month.

Top billing must once again go to Scotland's duo of Harlequin Ducks. Save a week's absence at the start of the month, the young drake in Aberdeen showed well almost constantly along its favoured stretch of the River Don, its plumage becoming ever-more dashing as the month wore on. The female off Brora, Highland, hasn't been showing quite as well, but has nevertheless drawn a modest crowd to the far north. It'll be interesting to see how long they linger – one wonders what the chances are that one (or both) might hang around through the summer.

The American Coot in Co

Kerry was last reported on 5th, although the Hebridean bird proved altogether more site faithful, lingering at Balranald RSPB, North Uist, until the end of the month.

Both Black Scoters were again reported during March, though the Northumberland bird proved considerably more elusive than its congener in Co Kerry. Last noted off Cheswick Sands on 2nd, it was not until 26th when it resurfaced – for 10 minutes only – at Cocklawburn Beach. Though reported fairly infrequently, the Rossbeigh bird proved a pillar of consistency by not shifting from its preferred stretch of coastline throughout.

Still around was the American Black Duck on Tresco, Scilly, which seems to have settled on Abbey Pool. At the opposite end of the country, the drake Blue-winged Teal remained at The Shunan, Orkney, throughout March; reports of a female at

Coward's Marsh, Dorset, mid-month transpired to relate to a Blue-winged Teal x Shoveler hybrid. News that the Rarities Committee is dropping Lesser Scaup from the list of species it considers ensures that this is the final month the species features in this section; at least six drakes were noted throughout the month, including new birds in Counties Cavan, Roscommon and Sligo, in addition to more familiar males still in Cornwall, Glamorgan and Ayrshire.

Wild goose chase?

In Northumberland, the adult Ross's Goose continued to cavort with Pink-footed Geese in the Widdrington area until 8th; it was subsequently relocated near Tullibody, Forth, from 11-24th and will presumably be heading back north with the Pink-feet imminently. At least one Richardson's Cackling Goose remained on Islay, Argyll, until

mid-month, while the Ridgway's Cackling Goose of questionable origin continued to frequent Cults Loch, Dumfries and Galloway, throughout.

One family that did fare well in March were gulls, with Bonaparte's Gull in particular enjoying a profitable month in terms of records. The long-staying adult in Cardiff, Glamorgan, was joined by a second bird from 24th onwards, with further new adults discovered at Thurso, Highland, on 3rd (presumably a returning bird) and Ormsary, Argyll, on 26-27th. A smart first-winter was showing well at Tramore boating lake, Co Waterford, on 15th and lingered in the area until 29th. Another youngster was discovered at Ferrybridge, Dorset, on 7th and subsequently relocated to nearby Radipole Lake from 17th, where it performed for the long lenses; a third first-winter was on Tiree, Argyll, on 24th.

The Cheshire Laughing Gull



RICHARD STONIER



Left: the photogenic first-winter Laughing Gull at New Brighton, Cheshire, remained popular into April, having first arrived on 3 February.

Bottom left: this first-winter American Herring Gull was found in Black Ball Harbour, Cahermore, Co Cork, in the early evening of 15 March, but sadly had gone the next day.

Below: staying for a whole month from 7 March until 7 April, this Bonaparte's Gull at Radipole Lake RSPB, Dorset, remained conveniently visible from watchpoints around the reserve. The species was available at several western sites around Britain, as this BirdGuides.com map shows. There haven't been any eastern individuals so far this year, unlike last year when Kent and Surrey both had birds.



PETER MOORE



FINN MOORE

continued to show to within feet of assembled onlookers at New Brighton marine lake throughout the month, while the second-winter at Ballycotton, Co Cork, was still present to at least 19th. A particularly smart and 'obvious' first-winter American Herring Gull found at Cahermore, Co Cork, on 15th proved the only confirmed individual of its age class during the month; a second-winter was recorded in fields near St Just, Cornwall, from 20-24th, and is a different bird to that touted as a 'possible' on the Hayle Estuary earlier in the month.

Yorkshire Yank gull

It seems that American Herring Gulls records are outnumbered by Thayer's Gulls, of which there was another record in March. The bird, a juvenile, was at North Yorkshire's gulling hot-spot

of Rufforth on 2-3rd. Perhaps unsurprisingly it proved to be the same bird as that seen in Wakefield in late December when photos were compared – where has it been in the interim?

Other odds and sods included the wintering Forster's Tern still in Galway Bay until its apparent departure on 19th, and two Lesser Yellowlegs: the reliable first-winter at Rogerstown Estuary, Co Dublin, and the altogether more elusive bird at Rye Harbour, East Sussex, which reappeared for a day only on 11th.

With a distinct lack of Great Spotted Cuckoos (and indeed any overshooting rare migrants), the landbird highlight during the second half of March was the discovery of a Desert Wheatear on St Agnes, Scilly, on 21st. So typically a bird of the late autumn period, its occurrence



JAMES DEANS

Standing out like a sore thumb, it wasn't hard to find this adult Ross's Goose among the Pink-footed Geese at Tullibody, Forth, where it was present from 7th to 24th. This is yet another apparently wild bird with its expected 'carrier species', and surely an overdue admission to the BOU's British list.

was something of a surprise – was the bird a genuine spring overshoot, or had it wintered somewhere in north-west Europe? Whatever its history, it was enjoyed by local birders until 25th.

The pair of Penduline Tits remained at Darts Farm, Devon, throughout the month and showed extremely well to all-

comers. Another photographed at Dyrham, Glos, on 11th was reported belatedly but represented an excellent inland record nonetheless. The Black-bellied Dipper at Harpham, East Yorks, continued to perform along Kelk Beck until 25th; two also remained on Shetland early in the month.

Last but by no means least,

the male Two-barred Crossbill was seen again at Speech House Woodland, Glos, on 21st and 25th. The logical assumption is that this is a bird left over from the exceptional influx of 2013, though no others have been reported from locations frequented last winter. A probable immature male was reported from a roadside larch plantation

near Crosslee, Borders, on 11th but not again. ■

• For full details of all March's sightings, go to www.birdguides.com. To receive free illustrated weekly sightings summaries and other news, sign up at bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews.

BIRDCUIDES

Remaining elusive, the adult drake American Black Duck on Tresco, Scilly, was seen intermittently into April, having first arrived on nearby Samson on 19 January. Scilly is the national hot-spot for this wandering Yank duck, and individuals have stayed to hybridise with local Mallards in the past – perhaps this bird will do the same, as it appears to be remaining faithful to its chosen flock.



JOE PENDER

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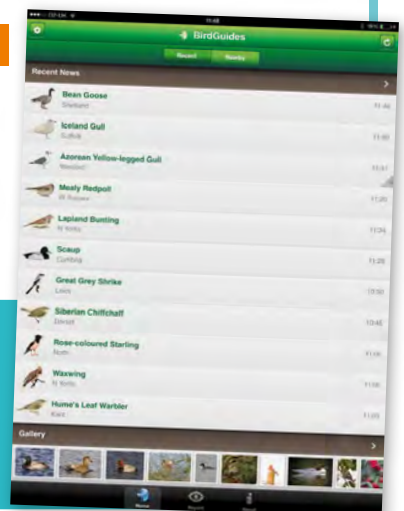
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Scarcities: March 2015

First signs of summer



Warm weather meant birds were on the move, with early migrants arriving and wintering birds starting to depart, reports **Josh Jones**.

This Great Grey Shrike overwintered on Beeley Moor, Derbyshire, and was still present as we went to press.



TONY DAVISON

March is synonymous with the first summer migrants arriving back in Britain and Ireland, and 2015 proved no exception. A spell of pleasantly mild conditions in the second week of the month encouraged the first widespread arrival of Northern Wheatears and Sand Martins from around 7th onwards; a few early Little Ringed Plovers sneaked in, too, with the first seen at Great Heck, North Yorks, and Sandwell Valley, West Mids, on 8th. Garganey also began to appear, with a flock of five at Titchwell, Norfolk, on 7th the harbingers of a wider arrival over the following days.

The first few Swallows and House Martins soon followed but, with conditions becoming somewhat less favourable as the month wore on, the early promise provided by the initial pulse of incoming migrants quickly fizzled out and thus the classic 'second-wave' species such as Willow and Sedge Warblers, Yellow Wagtails and Tree Pipits were still very thin on the ground by the end of the month.

Swiftly does it

With a general paucity of commoner species and unfavourable conditions, March was never particularly likely to prove a classic month for early spring overshoots. Hoopoes can often be quite numerous when March is mild, but not this year: just one was reported, from near Allihies, Co Cork, on 24th – a typical south-westerly location for the species in early spring. Birds such as Night Heron, Red-rumped Swallow and Woodchat Shrike – all of which have appeared in late March in recent years – failed to make an appearance.

Alpine Swift, however, did pitch up twice – and both were well inland. The first record concerned an extremely early bird seen a few times in Wolverhampton city centre during the afternoon of 9th, but it could not be relocated the following morning. Happily the month's second was altogether more twitchable: found on the north side of Crawley on 28th, it spent that evening and the next roosting on the Virgin Atlantic building. It was also

seen occasionally during the day, ensuring good numbers of birders caught up with it before its last appearance late morning on 30th.

Fortunately the scant showing of scarce migrants was compensated for by a respectable cast of lingering passerines. The two male European Serins hung on at Gunners Park, Essex, until 21st, while there was belated news of a male visiting feeders in Washingborough, Lincs, on 8th. Little Buntings remained at Forest Farm, Glamorgan, and Marazion, Cornwall, throughout, with just one new bird briefly at Stanpit Marsh, Dorset, on 20th.

Richard's Pipits enjoyed another fruitful month of sightings, with a new bird discovered at Newhaven, East Sussex, on 12th. This individual continued to perform well until 21st, when its life came to an abrupt end in the talons of a Sparrowhawk. The Cumbria individual was seen again near Parton from 8-20th, while long-stayers remained in Kent, Norfolk (two) and North Yorkshire.

Warbler in the works

A Yellow-browed Warbler discovered at Sedgeberrow sewage works, Worcs, from 6th was the most northerly reported of the winter. It lingered there until the end of March. A handful of birds continued in Devon and Cornwall, while a surprise record of an individual briefly in Birmingham, West Mids, on 26th was perhaps on its way north.

The build-up of White-billed Divers in the Moray Firth has become a talking point in recent springs and the early signs are that 2015 is to be no exception. The first bird appeared off Portsoy, Aberdeens, on 13th, with numbers quickly rising to six by 21st – this tally will no doubt increase further as April progresses. Elsewhere, lingering birds remained in traditional locations on Shetland (Kirkabister and Bluemull Sound) and Orkney (between Burray and South Ronaldsay).

One of the highlights of March – at least for East Anglian birders – was a wandering second-winter White-tailed Eagle (see pages



One of the more reliable sites for the ever-scarcer Red-necked Grebe is Farmoor Reservoir, Oxon. This classic fresh summer-plumaged adult was there from 24th into April, though the British total didn't even reach double figures.

10-11). First photographed near North Fambridge, Essex, early morning on 14th (having roosted overnight), it spent the next couple of weeks touring Suffolk and latterly Norfolk, where

it lingered in the Horsey and Hickling area for at least five days from 19th before another brief appearance over East Dereham on 29th. At least one White-tailed Eagle was also seen in Durham during March, with an adult

STEVE HOPPER



MARK LEITCH

Two Alpine Swifts were seen late in the month, including this roosting bird at Crawley, Surrey, from 28-30th. Hawking around the Gatwick Airport area during the day, this bird seemed to show a special affiliation to the Virgin Atlantic building there.



At times during the winter, it seemed as if there were almost as many Kumlien's Gulls as Iceland Gulls in Britain, it being a relatively poor year for the latter (bar the exceptional flock on Lewis, Outer Hebrides, in early March). This BirdGuides.com map demonstrates that March's Kumlien's were – not atypically considering their origins – showing a western distributional bias, though a couple made it to the Midlands and North-East.



Ireland fared less well for Kumlien's Gull than Britain. This individual (with Black-headed Gull, left) was photographed at Lurgan, Co Armagh.

GERRY O'NEILL



PAUL SPEAR



SIMON KNIGHT

Anglesey often produces Lapland Buntings (above left), and this bird was at Cemlyn Bay on 16th. Perhaps more notable was a small influx of inland Little Buntings, which included this reliable bird (above right) at Gulval, Cornwall, photographed on 12th. Birders often speculate that more individuals of this species are present in Britain in winter than is appreciated, hidden among the roving rural winter finch, bunting and sparrow flocks.

reported from Ruffside Moor on 8th, followed by an immature in the Stanhope and Bollilhope area from 24th and in to April.

Back in black

A fairly routine showing of Black Brants saw all but one recorded with Dark-bellied Brent Goose flocks between East Yorkshire and Devon, with twos reported in the former county and Suffolk. The exception was a bird at Ventry, Co Kerry, from 10-22nd. Three Canada Geese, unassigned to subspecies, were among Barnacle and Greylag Geese at Roonah Lough, Co Mayo, on 16th, while the *parvipes* bird remained at

Wexford Wildfowl Reserve.

New American Wigeon included a pair at West Burra, Shetland, on 21st and at least one (a drake and probable female) at Balranald, North Uist, on 28th; another drake was new on the Taw Estuary, Devon, on 24-25th. Further birds remained in Orkney, Ayrshire, West Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Co Leitrim and Co Cork. Green-winged Teal were slightly more numerous, with around 20 birds noted across Britain and Ireland including nine new birds throughout March, suggesting that wildfowl were on the move.

There was only a single report of Ferruginous Duck

during March: a female briefly at Lakenheath Fen, Suffolk, on 21st. *Aythya* flocks were evidently on the move throughout the month, as northbound birds brought with them at least 11 new Ring-necked Ducks widely scattered across Britain and Ireland in addition to a similar number of lingering birds.

The peak Surf Scoter count off the Conwy coastline during March was three, including two drakes. Lingering birds remained in Lothian, Suffolk/Essex, Hampshire, Co Clare and Co Wexford, while new drakes were discovered off Rerwick Head, Orkney, on 3rd, Ben Head, Co Meath, from 12-21st, Unst,

Shetland, from 20-22nd and Hoylake, Cheshire, from 25th.

After such a quiet winter for the species, the arrival of an amazing flock of 72 Iceland Gulls between Port Nis and Butt of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, on 8th was something of a surprise to say the least. Ring-billed Gull passage also picked up throughout the month, with several new birds discovered across Britain. Peak counts were, as always, in Ireland, with an impressive five at Sandymount, Co Dublin, on 26th, four at Nimmo's Pier, Co Galway, and a few twos and threes thrown in for good measure. ■

BIRDBUIDES

Shore Lark is another classic winter passerine that has been decreasing in recent years, but among the more reliable places for the species is Blakeney Point, Norfolk, where this bird was photographed. It was one of up to eight present during the last week of the month.



TOM WHILEY

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Western Palearctic: March 2015

Ready, set, go

The signs that migration was starting up were all there in Israel, while many of last month's birds lingered. **Josh Jones** has the news round-up from across the region.

March traditionally signals the beginning of spring migration across the Western Palearctic, and the fruits of early passage were typically most prominent in Israel. A Grey Hypocolius at Ashkelon on the Mediterranean Sea coast from 26th was the first national record away from the Eilat/Arava Valley area. Meanwhile, an early Caspian Plover was seen at Yotvata on 13th, with another on 31st, and at least three Black Bush Robins were in the Arava Valley.

A female Caspian Plover at Marsa Alam, Egypt, on 13th represents just the sixth national record of what is evidently a grossly under-recorded species in the country. An adult Lesser Flamingo among its Greater congeners at Kulu Lake near Konya, Turkey, on 9th is presumably a returning bird and may even be the individual last seen in Israel in February. This was followed by a micro-influx of Asian Desert Warblers around Antalya, with the seventh and eighth national records reported, alongside a male Caspian Plover. An Asian Crimson-winged Finch at Paphos lighthouse, Cyprus, on 12th follows hot on the heels of two birds near Mandria in January.

News from the Cape Verde Islands concerned the continued presence of both Black Heron and Intermediate Egret at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, mid-month. An adult Kelp Gull was at Akhfenir,

OZ HORINE



Above: this Grey Hypocolius at Ashkelon National Park, Israel, on 26th was the first record away from the Arava Valley and the first spring record for 15 years; overall there are fewer than 20 records for the country.

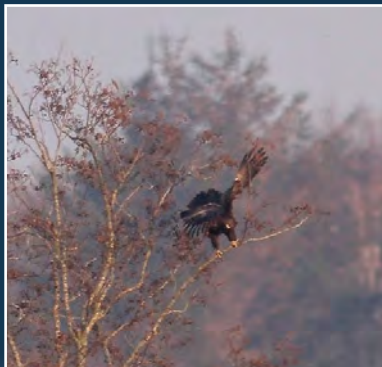
Inset: a Black Heron gave a flavour of Africa to Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, Cape Verde Islands. It was often accompanied by an Intermediate Egret.



There were three Black Bush Robins in Israel simultaneously, including this confiding individual at Yotvata.

NICK WATMOUGH

RAFAEL ARMADA (WWW.RAFAELARMADA.NET)



Left: Greater Spotted Eagle is usually a bird of the former eastern bloc countries and Russia, so this bird on the German coast in Schleswig-Holstein was welcome. It stayed for at least a week mid-month.

THOMAS HANSEN



ARNOUD B. VAN DEN BERG



AGNIESZKA JONCZYK

Above: the long-staying Spotted Sandpiper at Medemblik, The Netherlands, lingered into March; it first arrived in January.

Left: the sixth for Egypt, this female Caspian Plover was on the lawns at the resort of Marsa Alam on 13th.

Morocco, on 8th, while small numbers of Sudan Golden Sparrows remained at Bir Anzarane early in the month. In Spain an African Desert Warbler was photographed at Parque Natural de la Albufera, Valencia, on 22nd, with the Pallas's Gull still there on 8th. In Catalonia, the Pygmy Cormorant remained at Aiguamolls de l'Empordà and the Brown Shrike at Deltebre throughout March, while the Thayer's Gull was still in Galicia to at least 23rd.

The second Asian Desert Warbler for France was a fantastic find on Noirmoutier Island on 24th; it was still present on 30th. The Grey-headed Gull was still in the harbour at Bisceglie, Italy, on 11th and a Black-winged Kite was in the north of the country near Maniago, Friuli-Venezia, from 1-9th at least.

The Glaucous-winged Gull was last reported from Reykjavík harbour, Iceland, mid-month, as was the drake Hooded Merganser at nearby Hrauntúnstjörn Lake. A drake American White-winged Scoter remained off Keflavík to 21st.

Though the Calandra Lark at Masku was not reported beyond 1st, Finland's other headline birds lingered throughout March. The Black-throated Accentor was still on Hailuoto on 26th and must be one of the most gettable of its kind to occur in Europe; the Azure Tit was also still at Kolari on 30th.

A quieter month for The Netherlands saw the lingering Dark-eyed Junco at Beijum, Groningen, register as the highlight, though the Spotted Sandpiper was also remained at Medemblik. The Wallcreeper at Dinant, Belgium, was still around in late March and, judging by its acquisition of a black throat, is a male.

A Dalmatian Pelican was in Łódź, Poland, from 8-24th at least, while a first-winter drake Black Scoter was off Dziwnów, West Pomerania, on 18th. A twitchable Greater Spotted Eagle was pleasing for German listers in Schleswig-Holstein mid-month, and a Dalmatian Pelican was at Nieder-Mockstadt, Hessen, from 23-25th. ■

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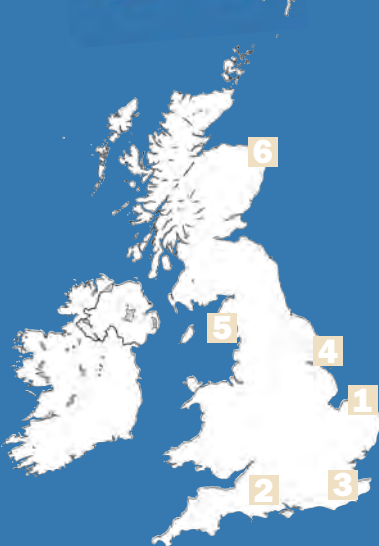
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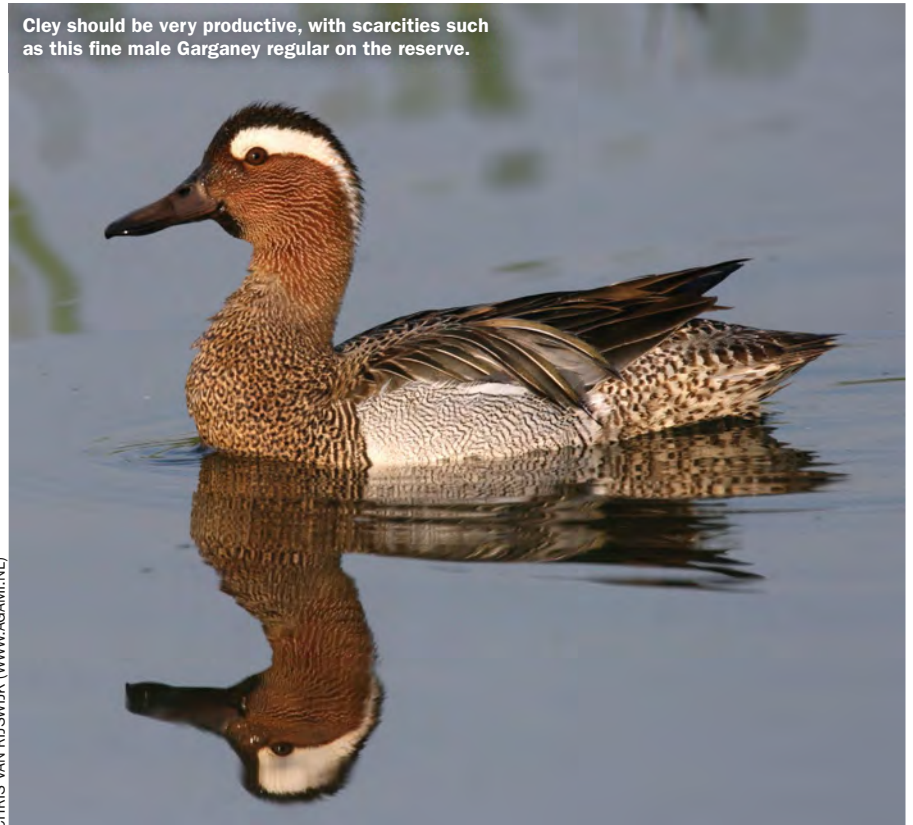
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1 SITE OF THE MONTH NORTH NORFOLK

This East Anglian county is rightly famed for its birding delights, and with spring migration in full swing, May is an excellent month in which to visit. **Andy Stoddart** identifies the best sites to get the biggest day list.

Cley should be very productive, with scarcities such as this fine male Garganey regular on the reserve.



CHRIS VAN RUSWIJK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

May in Norfolk is one of the most special times of year in this most special of counties. Spring migration has reached its height, most of the summer visitors have arrived and the greatest possible day lists of the year are now on offer. A long day in mid-month will make the most of this bonanza, but three strategies are key to securing the best possible list.

Early start

The first tip is to get up early and stay out late. The days are long now and

every moment of daylight should be used. Secondly, it is important to keep an eye on the weather. Easterly winds will bring the promise of migrants from the Continent, while westerlies will lead to an increase in westward diurnal migration along the coast. Thirdly, keep an eye on the news on BirdGuides. At this time of year it is highly likely that some extra birds can also be twitched along the way. May is prime time for such delights as Red-footed Falcon, Woodchat Shrike and Subalpine Warbler, and there are many rarer possibilities.

USEFUL CONTACTS

Travel information and timetables

- **Traveline:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline.info.
- **Traveline Scotland:** 0871 200 2233 or www.travelinescotland.com.
- **Traveline Cymru:** 0871 200 2233 or www.traveline-cymru.info

- **Stagecoach Bus:** www.stagecoachbus.com.
- **Arriva Bus:** 0844 800 4411 or www.arrivabus.co.uk.
- **National Rail:** 0845 748 4950 or www.nationalrail.com.
- **Sustrans:** 0117 926 8893 or www.sustrans.org.uk.

National bird news

BirdGuides.com: for all bird news and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email sightings@birdguides.com or visit www.birdguides.com.

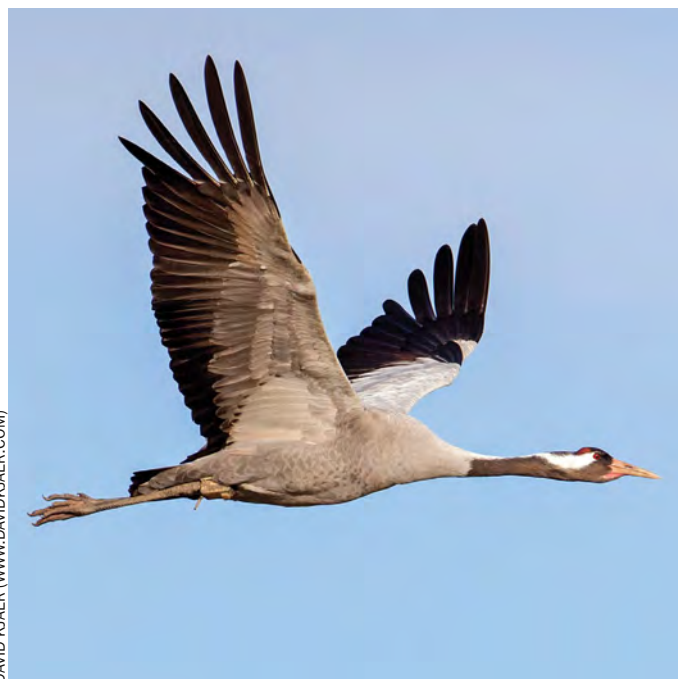
Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all

itineraries at bit.ly/BWMaps.

Further information

- **County bird recorders:** www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders.
- **Birdwatch Bookshop:** for discounted birding books see www.birdwatch.co.uk/store.



DAVID KJAER (WWW.DAVIDKJAER.COM)

A small population of Common Cranes is established in Norfolk. Keep an eye on the sky for the possibility of an over-flying bird.

Most of the time should be spent along or near the north coast, so to avoid back-tracking it makes sense to do a run in one direction. I would start towards the east end around the Kelling Quags area ①, looking both at Kelling Water Meadow and at the surrounding grassy areas and scattered bushes. In a west wind there will be some visible migration of hirundines and swifts, and hopefully some **Yellow Wagtails** and **Northern Wheatears**.

Next it will be best to head west towards Cley. Stop first, however, at the grazing marsh pools in front of Salthouse village. These can be excellent for **Yellow Wagtail**, passage waders and loafing gulls. Make sure to look, or better still listen, for **Mediterranean Gull**. Head up the hill behind the village for **Willow Warbler**, **Blackcap** and **Common** and **Lesser Whitethroats**, as well as **Yellowhammer** and **Linnet** in the high hedges along the edge of the heath. You may just have time to hear a **Nightingale**.

Norfolk's jewel

Spend as long as you can at Cley ②. The reedbeds will yield a cacophony of **Reed** and **Sedge Warblers** and hopefully some views of **Bearded Tit**. The pools should provide **Avocet**, **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Little Egret**, **Marsh Harrier** and a selection of passage waders. Arnold's Marsh should hold at least **Sandwich**, **Common** and **Little Terns**, with further waders

feeding in its salty waters.

Although not a prime time for seawatching, a few minutes looking at the sea may yield some otherwise hard-to-get species such as **Northern Gannet** and **Common Scoter**. Otherwise, spend your time around the reserve looking (and listening) for anything else. If it's a nice day, keep an eye on the sky for a 'fly-along' **Osprey**



JARI PELTOMAKI (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

While not the prime time for seawatching, in the right conditions some seawatching at Cley could add **Black Tern** to your day list.

or perhaps a small group of **Common Cranes**. Other regular scarcities at Cley in May include **Garganey**, **Temminck's Stint** and **Wood Sandpiper**, while in east winds **Black Terns** may be on the menu.

If your priority is a big day list you will need to venture inland to see all the birds which you won't collect at the coast. Just inland of Cley in the Glaven

Hull Wood at the Bayfield Estate should provide a range of woodland species.



ANDY STODDART



Valley, the Bayfield Estate **3** around Glandford provides a great variety of woodland and parkland habitats and you should find here **Common Buzzard**, **Egyptian Goose** and the common woodland passerines.

It is now time to head back to the coast and take in some estuarine habitat. This will boost your day list, with any **Brent Geese** still lingering in the area and some waders you may have missed at Cley such as **Bar-tailed Godwit**, **Grey Plover** and **Sanderling**. Stiffkey Fen **4** should be your stop. The freshwater pool is great for waders, but you also should take care to scan Blakeney Harbour for estuary waders and distant views of the gull and tern colony on the tip of Blakeney Point **5**. If you haven't yet seen a Mediterranean Gull, this is a species to prioritise here.

Woodland wonders

If you still need any woodland species such as **Green Woodpecker**, try Holkham Park **6** (a good bet at the moment for **Red Kite** too) but otherwise continue west. Stopping anywhere such as Burnham Overy Staithe or Burnham Norton will be rewarding but, if it's a big day list you're after, Titchwell **7** will provide the greatest variety of species and the best chance to catch up with any birds you may have missed earlier. Don't forget to go right to the beach as something new for your list may be here or on the sea. After returning to your car, exploring the roads just inland will fill in any missing farmland species and you may also get a **European Turtle Dove**.

By now, you will probably be

Aim to spend a while at the Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve of Cley Marshes. The reedbeds should yield Reed and Sedge Warblers and possibly Bearded Tit.

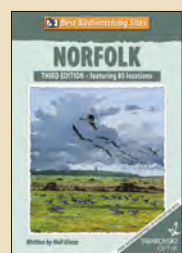


exhausted, but the delights of Thornham and Holme **8** are just around the corner. In an east wind there may well be some grounded migrants, and the dunes and bushes at Holme are

an excellent place to search. Otherwise just focus now on what you're missing and maybe finish off with a **Northern Fulmar** on the cliffs at Hunstanton **9** and a well-earned drink. ■

i VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Best Birdwatching Sites in Norfolk by Neil Glenn (third edition, Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £15.95 on page 77.

Sites and access

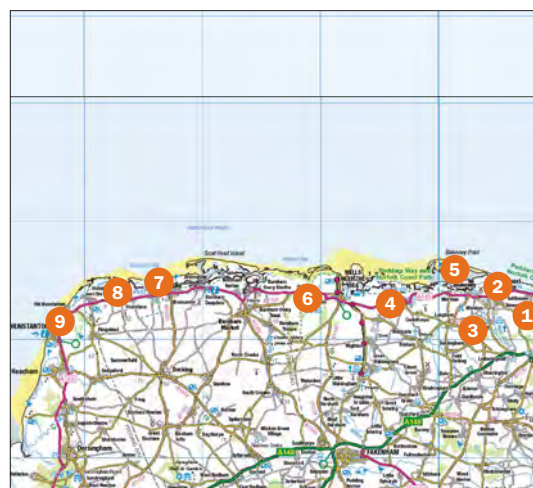
All the sites listed have full public access, though (for non-members) a permit is required for access to the hides at Cley Marshes Norfolk Wildlife Trust reserve and to the Holme NWT and Norfolk Ornithologists' Association reserves. Car parking charges may also apply. This itinerary could be followed on public transport by using the Coasthopper bus service (01553 776980 or visit www.coasthopper.co.uk). There are train stations at King's Lynn and Sheringham. There is disabled access at Cley Marshes, but much of this itinerary requires walking on unimproved paths.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers 250, 251 and 252 and Landrangers 132 and 133.

Web resources

- www.northnorfolkbirds.co.uk for bird guiding in north Norfolk.
- www.norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk for the NWT reserves.
- www.noa.org.uk for the Norfolk Ornithologists' Association.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to the fully annotated Google maps.

2

DORSET

By Marcus Lawson

Where and why

May is a very exciting time to be out birding in Dorset, with many specialist breeders as well as the chance of just about anything appearing on migration. While not exhaustive, this route should see the day tally top 120 species, if fortuitous with migration on both land and sea. Habitats to visit include chalk downland, heathland, woodland, reedbed and water meadows.

Route planner

A pre-dawn start in the north of the county at Martin Down NNR (park at SU 036201) **1** is essential. As dawn breaks listen for **European Turtle Dove**, **Yellowhammer**, **Corn Bunting**, **Lesser Whitethroat** and many other woodland and scrub species to get the day list off to a flying start. Spend the first two hours of light covering as much habitat as possible then head south-west on the A354. A brief run round Thorncombe Wood (park at SY 724921) **2** should yield **Marsh Tit** and other common woodland species to keep the list ticking over nicely.

Continue to Maiden Castle and park in the lay-by (SY 664900) **3** to scan for any downland species which may have been missed earlier. From here navigate your way to Abbotsbury (The Fleet) and view from SY 580842 for any lingering winter wildfowl or a migrant **Garganey**. Previous May rarities here include Alpine Swift and Red-footed Falcon. Then head east on the B3157 towards Portland Bill and park in the pay-and-display car park (SY 677684) **4**.

A quick seawatch should hopefully add a few species to the list including **Common Guillemot**, **Razorbill**, **Northern Gannet**, **Kittiwake**, **Northern Fulmar** and maybe some diver or skua action and the chance of **Puffin**. Check the rocky shore for **Turnstone** and **Rock Pipit**.

Wander back towards the bird observatory, checking the fields as you go, and scan the quarry for the resident **Little Owl**. Pop into the observatory to see if anything of interest has been seen in the area – if there are migrants around it could be worth walking the fields directly opposite the observatory. The full tally of recent springtime rarities is too long to list – Collared Flycatcher, Eastern Bonelli's, Blyth's Reed and Eastern Olivaceous Warblers and Zitting Cisticola are the pick of the bunch.

Drag yourself away from this birding mecca and make your way off-island. Stop at the Chesil Beach visitor centre on your left and park in the pay-and-display car park (SY 668754) **5**. A **Little Tern** colony persists here, and check the mud for any passage waders if the tide allows, **Kentish Plover** being an outside chance. Take the opportunity to treat yourself to a nice cup of tea and cake here.

Suitably refreshed, head on to Radipole Lake RSPB **6**; park in the pay and display (SY 676795) and quickly scoot around the buddleia loop trail, adding reedbed specialists and perhaps a migrant **Black Tern**. Past goodies here include Black-winged Stilt, Red-rumped Swallow, Great Reed Warbler and Whiskered Tern.



ROY DE HAAS (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

Chesil Beach holds the only Little Tern colony in south-west England.

Then it's on to nearby Lodmoor RSPB. Park in the pay-and-display car park (SY 687809) and make your way around the 1.5-mile circular walk, scanning for waders and wildfowl. This is another rarity hot-spot, with Citrine Wagtail, Squacco Heron, Little Bittern and several Red-rumped Swallows recorded in recent years.

Morden Bog **7**, of Short-toed Eagle fame, is the next destination; park at SY 919926 on the B3075. Cross the road and follow the footpaths, looking and listening for heathland specialists. Spend an hour or so here and

then head to Brand's Bay **8** in Poole Harbour; park on the B3351 at SZ 024850 and walk west to the hide. Tide dependent, there should be a good selection of waders here including **Knot**, **Grey Plover** and **Bar-tailed Godwit**.

The last stop is Arne RSPB **9**. Use the pay-and-display car park (SY 971877) and follow signs to the viewpoint, where you can scan a large expanse of Poole Harbour for wildfowl, waders and hopefully **Spoonbill**. With luck, as you return to your car the first **European Nightjar** may have returned, ending your day on a high. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Dorset, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight by George Green and Martin Cade (fourth edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

Sites and access

There is free public access to all sites, but car parking at Arne RSPB costs up to £4 and other parking charges will apply. There are train stations at Salisbury, Weymouth and Wareham. Local bus services are run by First Group (call 0333 014 3490 or visit www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/dorset). The RSPB reserves are all on Route 26 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network. You will need a car to follow the whole itinerary. There is disabled access at the two RSPB reserves.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers OL 15 and 130 and Landrangers 184, 194 and 195.

Web resources

- www.dorsetbirds.blogspot.co.uk for sightings in Dorset.
- www.birdsofpooleharbour.co.uk/sightings for sightings in Poole Harbour.
- Follow on Twitter: @dorsetbirdclub, @RSPBWeymouth, @RSPBArne, @harbourbirds, @DorsetBirdNews and @PortlandBirdObs.



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See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

Where and why

A chain of former gravel pits and colliery subsidence lakes extend from Fordwich to Upstreet below wooded hillsides and farmland. The National Nature Reserve at Stodmarsh and Grove Ferry is an outstanding area for birds, including summer migrants and spring passage waders, and rarities are possible. A big day here could deliver more than 80 species.

Route planner

The marshes of the Stour Valley lie a couple of miles east of Canterbury, south of the A28. Access to Stodmarsh is signposted from the A257 Canterbury to Sandwich road just past the golf course. The reserve car park is down a narrow lane on the left just behind the Red Lion pub. Alternative access is from Grove Ferry, where there is a Kent County Council pay-and-display car park.

Aim to be at Stodmarsh NNR car park (TR 221609) ¹ soon after dawn. It is worth listening for a few minutes to the cacophony of warbler song; all the common species are present, accompanied by **Cetti's Warbler** and **Nightingale**, while **European Turtle Dove** might be purring from the trees.

Take the main path left out of the car park and follow through the trees to the Reedbed Hide (TR 222614) ², where it is worth looking out for a **Bittern**; at the very least it should be possible to hear one booming, while **Marsh Harriers** float over the reeds and **Bearded Tits** buzz



The reedbeds at Stodmarsh NNR could provide a booming Bittern or a Marsh Harrier searching for prey.

about feeding young. This is also a good place to see **Water Rail** at the water's edge.

Head back to the main path and turn left, following round to a sluice and bridge into the Alder Wood nature trail (TR 224612) ³. This deserves a careful look for **Garden Warbler**, **Treecreeper**, **Stock Dove** and **Sparrowhawk** among the commoner species, while the open section has been very attractive to **Penduline Tits** in recent years.

The path emerges onto the

Lampen Wall (TR 224615) ⁴ close to the boathouse, where it is worth looking out for a local **Barn Owl** returning to roost. The path continues, giving great views of the lake and a range of wetland birds including grebes, ducks, **Cormorant** and **Common Tern**, especially from the Tower Hide overlooking the lake. In most years a **Savi's Warbler** is found singing somewhere in the reeds, though sadly they no longer stay to breed.

The path along the banks

of the Stour suffered damage during the recent floods and at present some of it is still closed, undergoing repair, but it should be open again soon. There are water meadows (TR 225624) ⁵ on the south-eastern side, where fresh pools carry an ever-changing catalogue of passage waders, especially **Green and Wood Sandpipers**, **Ruff** and **Spotted Redshank**, alongside breeding **Northern Lapwing**, **Common Redshank**, **Common Snipe** and **Yellow** and occasionally **Blue-headed Wagtails**. The river is very good for **Kingfisher**, while **Garganey** is regular but elusive.

The ramp at Grove Ferry (TR 235628) ⁶ is a great place to recover from the walk as it gives good views over the reedbeds. By mid-morning **Hobbies** are beginning to appear overhead, hunting insects. This is also the best place to scan for raptors, with the regular **Common Buzzards** being joined by passage **Red Kite**, **Honey Buzzard** and **Osprey** every year. The pools can hold **Black-tailed Godwit**, **Greenshank**, **Garganey** and sometimes **Temminck's Stint**.

The walk back to Stodmarsh via the Marsh Hide (TR 226618) ⁷ brings inevitable **Common Cuckoos**, sadly fewer **European Turtle Doves** and perhaps some passage **Whinchats** or even **Eurasian Whimbrels** around the pastures. The path leads back to Stodmarsh along the dykes and ditches still full of singing warblers, while **Common Swifts** and hirundines dodge the **Hobbies** hunting overhead. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Kent, Surrey and Sussex by Don Taylor, Jeffery Wheatley and Paul James (fifth edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

> Sites and access

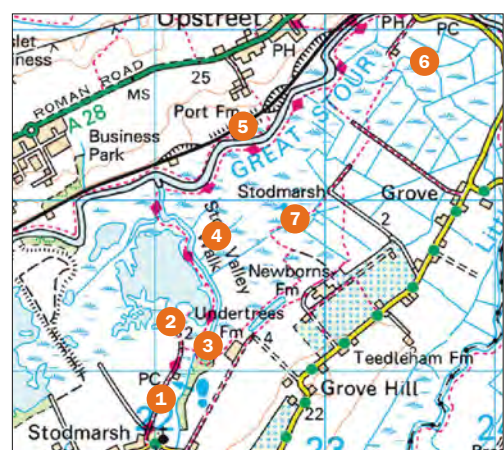
There is free public access to Stodmarsh. The reserve is open all day and parking is free, although parking charges apply at other sites. The nearest train station is at Sturry. Regular bus services along the A28 from Sturry to Upstreet are provided by Stagecoach East Kent. Stodmarsh is on Route 1 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network. There is a disabled toilet at the Stodmarsh car park and some wheelchair access along the nature trail and also at Grove Ferry, though much of the infrastructure is currently under repair after flood damage and may not be suitable, especially after rain.

> Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 150 and Landranger 179.

> Web resources

- bit.ly/bw275StodmarshNE for Natural England's information on Stodmarsh NNR.
- www.kentos.org.uk for the Kent Ornithological Society.
- Follow on Twitter: @KentishPlover.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps



4

YORKSHIRE

By Andy Roadhouse

Where and why

Yorkshire is an excellent destination for a big day in May. If you want to see as many species as possible and have a great but fairly relaxed day's birding, all you need is a well-planned route taking in four or five sites. This itinerary covers a variety of habitats, providing great opportunity to see lots of species. The list of rarities at these coastal sites in May has included Pallid Harrier, Broad-billed Sandpiper, Pallid Swift, European Roller, Thrush Nightingale, Rock Thrush, Blyth's Reed, Spectacled and Hume's Warblers and Collared Flycatcher.

Route planner

An early morning start at Spurn ¹, the most versatile site on the Yorkshire coast, will get the day off to a good start. Visible migration will be in evidence no matter what the conditions, and many species can be picked up flying south over 'Numpties' by the Warren.

Apart from a steady stream of hirundines, wagtails and finches, there could be **Red-throated Diver**, **Common Eider** and **Common Scoter** offshore. If lucky, you could jam in on something rarer: **Montagu's Harrier**, **Osprey**, **Serin** or **Red-rumped Swallow** are all possibilities, along with five species of tern flying out east.

All the time check the Humber for the **Brent Geese**, **Shelduck** and estuarine waders found there that can be difficult at many other sites. **Peregrine Falcon**, **Merlin** and **Hobby** are all a possibility, chasing waders and passerines

Spurn is an excellent destination for a big day in May. Summer migrants should include such goodies as Red-backed Shrike.



IAN SMITH

over the Humber.

If there has been a fall of migrants you will soon hear over the locals' shortwave radios. If so, it is worth spending the rest of the morning in the Spurn area as birds will be found for most of the day, and from mid-May can include **Golden Oriole**, **Bluethroat**, **Red-backed Shrike**, **Marsh and Icterine Warblers** and **Common Rosefinch**. The area also has some of the best places to see commoner migrants such as **European Turtle Dove**, **Common Cuckoo**, **Whinchat**, **Common**

Redstart, **Ring Ouzel**, all the regular warblers, and **Spotted** and **Pied Flycatchers**.

A good walk round the Triangle and up Beacon Lane to Kilnsea Wetlands ² will reveal any migrants, as well as a good chance of adding **Avocet**, **Eurasian Whimbrel**, **Little Tern**, **Short-eared Owl** and **Corn Bunting** to the list. It is very easy to record more than 100 species at Spurn in less than a day.

If it's quiet, less than an hour's drive up the coast is Hornsea Mere ³, where a good selection

of ducks can be added to the list and the surrounding woodland can reveal **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, **Garden Warbler**, **Coal Tit**, **Nuthatch**, **Treecreeper** and **Bullfinch**.

Next stop should be the 'Great White Cape' of Flamborough ⁴. Regular tweets from Flamborough Bird Observatory will keep you informed of any rare or scarce birds that have arrived, and the new wetland at Thornwick Pool will attract migrant waders and wildfowl. Carry on to Bempton Cliffs RSPB. Here you can add **Northern Fulmar**, **Northern Gannet**, **Shag**, **Kittiwake**, **Common Guillemot**, **Razorbill** and **Puffin** in a very short space of time.

If there are migrants around, Filey ⁵ is also worth a visit and the bay may still hold a lingering diver or a **Purple Sandpiper** on the Brigg. If it's a quiet day, head back across the Yorkshire Wolds north of Beverley and you should pick up some farm birds, **Red Kite** and **Common Buzzard**.

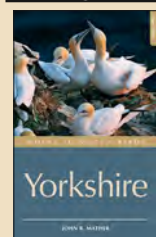
Stop at North Cave Wetlands ⁶ for the chance of any ducks, waders and gulls you may have missed earlier. The day should end at Blacktoft Sands RSPB ⁷, where along with yet another chance of waders and ducks, there is also the possibility of adding **Bittern**, **Marsh Harrier**, **Water Rail**, **Barn Owl**, **Cetti's Warbler** and **Bearded Tit**.

The key to a good bird day in Yorkshire is to make the most of the weather conditions. If it is obviously a good day for migrants then stay on the coast and maximise this. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Yorkshire by John Mather (third edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77

Sites and access

Entry to Bempton Cliffs RSPB is £3.50 and to Blacktoft Sands RSPB is £4 (both free to RSPB members). There is free public access to all other sites, but there is a charge of £4 per car at the Spurn Point visitor centre and other parking charges may apply. Access to the point is on foot. You will need a car to follow this itinerary. There is good wheelchair access at Bempton Cliffs and Blacktoft Sands.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers 291, 292 and 301 and Landrangers 101, 106 and 107.

Web resources

- For further information on each of the sites: www.spurnbirdobservatory.co.uk, www.fbo.org.uk, www.fbog.co.uk, www.northcavewetlands.com, www.rspb.org.uk/BemptonCliffs and www.rspb.org.uk/BlacktoftSands.
- Follow on Twitter: @spurnbirdobs, @FlamboroughBird, @Fileybirder, @NorthCaveWet, @Bempton_Cliffs and @YCNature.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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5

MORECAMBE BAY

By Gary Prescott

Where and why

With the Bay Cycling Way opening in early June, there has never been a better time to explore the green birding opportunities of the vast Morecambe Bay complex in Lancashire. With its spectacular views across estuarine expanses and the wide variety of habitats en route, the Bay Cycling Way will take you from mass wader roosts at Hest Bank RSPB north to Leighton Moss RSPB. The reserve has freshwater lakes, extensive reedbeds, woodland fringes and brackish pools. If taking part in a green big day, this route will provide a wide variety of bird species.

Route planner

Start the day next to the statue of the late Eric Morecambe, located on the A589, Marine Road Central, 90 m east of Morecambe Leisure Park (SD 433644) ①. Note Eric's binoculars on the statue – he was a keen local ornithologist. Scan the estuarine sands to the north. **Eurasian Curlew** and **Oystercatcher** are commonly seen, and if it is high tide, there is a chance of terns.

Take the Bay Cycling Way (Sustrans National Route 69) to the east along the seafront for 2 miles, heading north-east. Leave the cycle path and continue along the A5105 for a third of a mile. Turn left at Crossing Cottage. Access to Hest Bank RSPB (SD 467666) ② car park is on the left after the level crossing. If possible, view the large wader flocks from an hour before high tide onwards. Scanning from the car park, look for for **Eurasian**

A splendid summer-plumaged Little Gull is possible at Leighton Moss RSPB.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSOFTHEWORLD.COM)

Whimbrel and **Greenshank** among the large flocks of **Knot**, **Oystercatcher**, **Ringed Plover**, **Dunlin** and **Bar-tailed Godwit**. Check the fenceposts for raptors such as **Peregrine Falcon**.

Return to the A5105 and turn right. After 140 m, turn left into Lonsdale Road and follow it until you reach Rushley Drive at the end of Rushley Mount. Turn left up Rushley Drive back to the traffic-free section of the cycle route. Turn left after a short ramp and follow the path for 3 miles. Listen for thrushes, titmice, finches and warblers along this old disused railway.

Leave the cycle path, turn left and carefully cross the A6. Take Longfield Drive onto Crag Bank Road. This path leads to Crag Bank Lane and then Shore Road. Follow for 1.5 miles, crossing the River Keer where the cycle path

takes a sharp turn to the left. Keep going to Sand Lane. Turn right, cross a railway bridge and turn left onto New Road.

Continue for 1.7 miles, checking the freshwater pools to your left, until an RSPB signpost points left. Take the dirt road to the car park to access a series of brackish lagoons called the Allen and Eric Morecambe pools, the first section of Leighton Moss RSPB (SD 476733) ③. Birds here could include **Avocet** and **Mediterranean Gull**, while good numbers of **Black-tailed Godwit** have been seen here, as have **Spoonbill**, **Glossy Ibis** and **Great Egret**.

Returning to New Road, turn left and cycle north to Slackwood Lane. Turn right and right again after 90 m to reach the visitor centre at Leighton Moss RSPB (SD 478750) ④.

Leaving your bike at the centre, walk the trails and bridleways to explore the reserve. Make sure you visit each area of the reserve to see **Bittern** and **Marsh Harrier** overflying the reedbeds. You may also see **Bearded Tit** and **Water Rail**. **Sedge** and **Reed Warblers** will be present. Listen out for **Marsh Tit** and **Cetti's Warbler**. In the woodland fringes and bushes within the reeds there will be **Willow Warbler**, **Blackcap**, **Common Whitethroat** and **Common Chiffchaff**, as well as one or two **Grasshopper Warblers**.

Don't forget to scan the skyline over Warton Crag for raptors such as **Common Buzzard**, **Hobby**, **Kestrel** and **Sparrowhawk**. With luck you may see **Garganey**, **Black Tern**, **Osprey**, **Spotted Crake**, **Wood** and **Green Sandpipers**, **Spotted Redshank**, **Greenshank** and **Little Gull**. ■



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



Where to Watch Birds in Britain by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

› Sites and access

Entry to Leighton Moss RSPB is £7, or free to RSPB members. All other sites are free, although car parking charges may apply. The visitor centre at Leighton Moss is open 9.30 am–5 pm. There are train stations at Morecambe, Carnforth and Silverdale. Stagecoach Bus runs local bus services. The itinerary follows Route 69 of the Sustrans National Cycle Network. There is good disabled access at Leighton Moss.

› Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 296 and Landranger 97.

› Web resources

- www.lancasterbirdwatching.org.uk for Lancaster and District Bird Watching Society.
- www.rspb.org.uk/LeightonMoss and www.rspb.org.uk/MorecambeBay for the two RSPB reserves.
- www.tidetimes.org.uk/morecambe-tide-times for tide times.
- www.morecambebay.org.uk/bay-cycle-way for the Bay Cycle Way.
- Follow on Twitter: @Leighton_moss and @MBNature.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

6

COASTAL ABERDEENSHIRE

By Mark Sullivan

Where and why

The coast north of Aberdeen contains a wide variety of superb birding habitats, from the estuary of the River Ythan and surrounding lochs to the woods and farmland of Cruden Bay and the magnificent seabird cliffs of the Bullars of Buchan. In May this route can provide a day list of more than 90 species, with a mix of waterfowl, gulls, terns, farmland birds, summer migrants and auks. There is also the chance of finding a spring overshoot or drift migrant.

Route planner

Choose a day with a morning low tide to get the best out of the Ythan stretch, before moving northwards as the tide covers the mudflats. Travelling north on the A90, turn right onto the A975 signposted to Newburgh. Turn right at the Newburgh Inn and follow Beach Road to a car park (NK 002247) ①.

Follow the path through gorse scrub, looking for **Linnet** and **European Stonechat**, to the Ythan Estuary at the old lifeboat station. From here scan for waders such as **Sanderling**, **Knot**, **Common Redshank** and **Dunlin**. Grey and Common Seals haul out on the opposite bank.

Turn north and walk along the shore, looking across to the tern colony. **Sandwich**, **Common**, **Arctic** and **Little Terns** all breed here, and at low tide can be watched fishing in isolated pools at close quarters. **Common Eider** is regular, and a late **Long-tailed Duck** or **Red-breasted Merganser** might be found in the main channel. A tin hut with seats provides a good

viewpoint across the estuary. It is possible to continue around the golf course to the car park, or to retrace your steps.

From the car park head north on the A975 and turn right onto Inch Road (NK 004256). Follow to the end, from where a view of the river at Inch Point can be made. The muddy bay by the block of flats holds both **Bar-tailed and Black-tailed Godwits** and **Eurasian Whimbrel**; this is often where a long-staying **King Eider** is found.

Head north again, and cross the River Ythan at Waterside Bridge. Check out the two lay-bys to the north of here, with the chance of a **Little Egret** or even a **Spoonbill** on the river. **Ospreys** regularly fish here, and often perch on the opposite bank.

Turn left at the Collieston crossroads and head downhill to a track to Waulkmill Hide. Park here and scan the waders and gulls. **Greylag** and **Pink-footed Geese** may still be found in the

surrounding fields.

Return to the A975 and head north. Meikle Loch RSPB lies some 4 miles north of Newburgh (NK 029308) ②. It is accessed from a rough unmarked track around 200 m south of Slains School. Scan the loch from the parking area. **Little Gull** can be found, the shoreline attracts waders, and **Marsh Harrier** is a regular spring passage bird.

The A975 continues to Cruden Bay; turn right opposite the Kilmarnock Arms (food available) and park at the first obvious car park (NK 094364) ③. Walk into the wood, following the stream. Along with regular resident birds, **Common Chiffchaff** and **Willow** and **Sedge Warblers** breed, while local rarities such as **Icterine Warbler** have occurred.

Continue to the coast and Slains Castle, checking the fields for **Northern Wheatear** and **Grey Partridge**, along with buntings and finches. The path

can be followed across the fields and back to the car park. Check the stream behind the shop for **Dipper** and **Grey Wagtail**.

On the northern edge of Cruden Bay, turn left onto the minor road signed for Auchiries. A lay-by at an old industrial site gives access to a series of brick pits (NK 088370) ④. Breeding ducks and **Little Grebe** occur here, and the scrub holds **Yellowhammer** and **Common Whitethroat**. An Eastern Subalpine Warbler was found here in May 2013.

Return to the A975 and drive north to the Bullars of Buchan (NK 107380) ⑤. Follow the path from the car park through the cottages onto the cliffs. Breeding **Shag**, **Common Guillemot** and **Razorbill** are regular, and **Puffins** can be watched at close range. **Northern Gannet** and skuas can be seen out at sea – a great way to finish a day out in Aberdeenshire! ■

Scan the Ythan Estuary for Common Eider (pictured) and the possibility of King Eider.



MARK SULLIVAN



VISITOR INFORMATION

READS



• **Where to Watch Birds in Britain** by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.
• **Birding Guide to North-East Scotland** by Mark Sullivan and Ian Francis (email geolbird_abz@btinternet.com).

Sites and access

There is free public access to all sites, although car parking charges may apply. Stagecoach Bus runs services from Aberdeen along the A975 with stops in Newburgh, Cruden Bay and Bullars of Buchan, but this itinerary is best followed by car. The terrain is generally not suitable for wheelchair access; however, Waulkmill Hide is wheelchair accessible, and birding from the car can be undertaken at Inch Point and Meikle Loch.

Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorers 421 and 427 and Landrangers 30 and 38.

Web resources

- www.nnr-scotland.org.uk/forvie for information on the Ythan Estuary and Forvie NNR.
- www.rspb.org.uk/groups/aberdeen for the Aberdeen and District RSPB local group
- <http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/ABZ-Rare-Birds/conversations/messages> for local bird sightings.



See bit.ly/BWMaps for links to fully annotated Google maps

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MAY'S TARGET BIRD

Long-tailed Skua



Breeding in the high Arctic, Long-tailed Skua is possible on passage during May. The north-west coasts of Scotland and west coast of Ireland can be good places to see the species.

REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

There can be few British seabirds as graceful and elegant as an adult Long-tailed Skua in spring. The smallest of the skuas, it is a scarce passage migrant in spring and autumn, but can be plentiful in some years.

There are two subspecies: *longicaudus* breeds in Scandinavia

and western Russia, while *pallascens* breeds in eastern Siberia, North America and Greenland. The latter has not been reliably seen in British waters, but could possibly occur. The main wintering area for European birds is off the coasts of southern and western Africa; most

start to leave there in the latter half of March, arriving back on their breeding grounds from the end of May.

Long-tailed Skuas can appear off the coast of Britain from the second week of May, and passage can involve anything from 100-1,600 birds. Very few are seen along the south and east coasts of Britain in spring. Return passage commences in August and the east coast in September is a good time to look.

The migration path of spring Long-tailed Skuas has been studied using geolocators, and together with ground-based migration observations this shows that most fly offshore from the west coast of Ireland, passing west of the Outer Hebrides and past Orkney and Shetland. With the right weather conditions, especially strong onshore winds, birds may be forced closer to land and pass between mainland Scotland and the Hebridean islands. Regular movements are seen using inland routes such as along the Great Glen from the Firth of Lorne into the Moray Firth, along the Solway Firth across to Northumberland, and from the Firth of Clyde to the Firth of Forth.

In May 2011, a total of 1,235 birds flew through Saltcoats, Ayrshire, and 200 passed over

Bowness-on-Solway, Cumbria, all heading inland. An unprecedented passage of Long-tailed Skuas took place on 22 May 2013 when an amazing 1,365 were seen flying past Aird an Runair, North Uist, Outer Hebrides. The following day 1,084 were seen flying inland past Corran Narrows, Highland, and in all 1,726 birds were seen in Scotland on 23 May.

Autumn passage is less easy to define, with birds being seen along the east coast, and some following a route into The Wash and cross country to the Bristol Channel. On 19 October 1991 an amazing 485 were seen passing Flamborough Head, East Yorkshire, part of a larger movement in Britain involving several thousand birds.

How to see

There is an element of luck involved, but mostly it is a question of choosing the right place and hoping the time is right. Check prevailing winds and watch for the first reports of birds being seen, as passage may often take place over several days. Choose a watchpoint with good visibility, and remember that birds can pass over high in the sky, so look up as well as out. The best times at some sites seem to be from a couple of hours before high tide to a couple of hours after. ■

i FIND YOUR OWN

Spring passage is best off the west coasts of Britain in mid- to late May, with the Outer Hebrides often claiming the largest visible migration. Strong westerly winds may blow some birds into the Irish Sea, where they could be seen from the Welsh coast. As well as watching from suitable land-based seawatching sites, taking a ferry or whale-watching trip in May off the west coast of Scotland can be rewarding. Autumn sightings are best from seawatching hot-spots (marked with an asterisk) from Northumberland down to Norfolk, especially in late August and September.

England

- **Cumbria:** Bowness-on-Solway (NY 204629)
- **Northumberland:** St Mary's Island* (NZ 352755)
- **Co Durham:** Hartlepool Headland* (NZ 535338)
- **East Yorkshire:** Flamborough Head* (TA 257705)
- **Norfolk:** Cley Beach* (TG 048453)

Wales

- **Gwynedd:** Criccieth (SH 504381)

Scotland

- **Ayrshire:** Stevenston Point/Saltcoats (NS 270402/245410)
- **Highland:** Corran Narrows (NN 016635)
- **Outer Hebrides:** Aird an Runair (NF 686704) and Ardivachar Point (NF 737456)



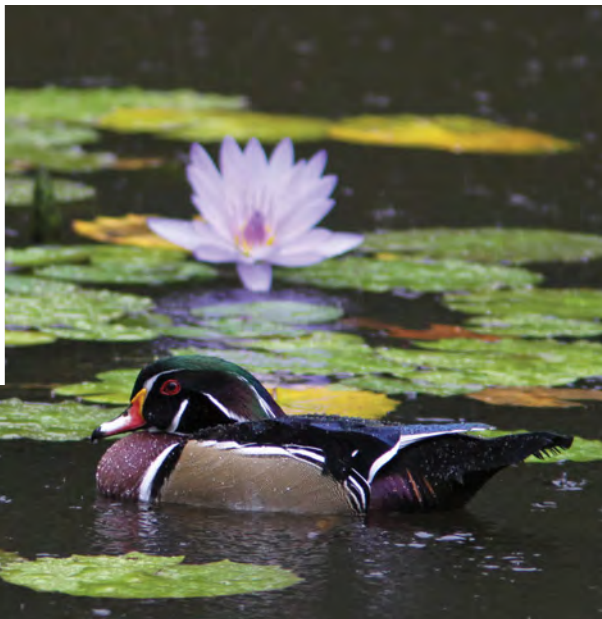
VISIT WWW.BIRDWATCH.CO.UK FOR TIPS ON FINDING MANY MORE TARGET BIRDS

Birdwatch World of birds

OUR EXCLUSIVE PROGRAMME OF READER HOLIDAYS

Join our amazing Azores birding tour this autumn

PHOTOS (LEFT TO RIGHT): AZORES BULLFINCH, WOOD DUCK AND YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO
BY DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDWATCH.CO.UK)



AZORES

■ **10-18 October 2015**
■ **Price: £1,330 plus international flights (approx £330)**

THE adrenaline rush of seeing a 'lifer' or finding a rarity is a thrill every birder enjoys, and autumn migration is full of the promise of such experiences – especially in the hot-spot of the Azores.

If you've never been, you are missing out. These beautiful Atlantic islands are firmly in the Western Palearctic, and the atmosphere often recalls island birding at home, yet the experience is on another level to the Isles of Scilly. The number and diversity of North American migrants and vagrants in autumn can be outstanding, and this annual tour has never failed to

find exciting birds.

Our itinerary covers three key islands, with the possibility of visiting a fourth, and includes the chance to see the endemic Azores Bullfinch. Much of the time the group will be targeting vagrant American wildfowl, waders and landbirds, all of which are possible almost anywhere.

This tour has a rich history: we'll aim to add to our long list of past rarities, which includes Wood Duck, White-tailed Tropicbird, Double-crested Cormorant, Tricoloured and Great

Blue Herons, Northern Harrier, 20 Nearctic wader species, American Mourning Dove, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Belted Kingfisher, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Grey Catbird, Hermit Thrush, Red-eyed, White-eyed and Yellow-throated Vireos, Ovenbird, Hooded, Blackpoll, Yellow-rumped, Yellow and Black-and-white Warblers, Northern Parula, American Redstart, Bobolink, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Indigo Bunting and Baltimore Oriole.

The tour is led by Dominic Mitchell, Managing Editor of *Birdwatch* and *BirdGuides.com*. Having first visited over 20 years ago, he has travelled extensively around the islands, added new birds to the Azores list and found or seen a total of 65 North American species in the archipelago. Join him on his 15th visit to the islands to share in a

unique and unmissable birding holiday.

■ **This tour is operated for Birdwatch by Archipelago Azores (fully bonded and licensed through the CAA, ATOL licence 6059). The price includes all internal flights, ground transportation, accommodation on a bed-and-breakfast basis and guiding. For an itinerary and reservations, call the company on 01768 775672, email info@azoreschoice.com or see bit.ly/bw264Azores.**

TRIP REPORTS

TO read Dominic Mitchell's reports from the Azores reader holidays, as well as accounts of a range of other trips, go to bit.ly/bwTripReports.

BOOK WITH PEACE OF MIND

OUR programme of reader holidays offers an unrivalled birding experience. We work in partnership with professional specialist companies to offer exciting itineraries led by experienced guides – and at prices that offer superb value for money. What's more, you can book your holiday with complete peace of mind – our partner companies are fully bonded with the CAA and hold ATOL licences, or have other arrangements in place to protect your money.

The basic cost of holidays may include return flights from London, all accommodation, ground transportation, some or most meals and a few other items, but the exact terms and conditions vary – please contact the company operating your holiday for further information and a detailed itinerary.

IN BRIEF

Shetland in autumn

■ **26 September-3 October 2015**
■ **Price: £1,145**

THE ultimate autumn migration experience in the Northern Isles, at the prime time for scarcities and rarities. Expect both, perhaps including some seriously rare vagrants (last year's haul included White's Thrush and Yellow-rumped Warbler), under the leadership of Shetland Nature's local experts.

■ **Contact Shetland Nature on 01957 710000 or email info@shetlandnature.net.**



MARK AVERY

Every vote counts

Whether it's the general election or a national bird for Britain, your vote sends a message, says **Mark Avery**, so make sure you get out there and make your mark.

I'd love to give you a blow-by-blow account of the inadequacy of the political parties' manifestos ahead of the general election, but as they haven't yet emerged, blinking into the light of day, I'll fall back on the most politically enmeshed British bird: Hen Harrier.

By the time you read this, my (now 'our') e-petition to ban driven grouse shooting will have closed, with more than 22,000 signatures gathered in just 10 months. This makes it, in purely numerical terms, one of the 0.5 per cent most successful e-petitions of all time on the Westminster government website. Thank you to all who have signed and to the many people and organisations, including *Birdwatch*, who helped breathe life into it.

But the importance of this e-petition cannot be measured in purely numerical terms. It has changed the nature of the debate about driven grouse shooting and made it more difficult for raptor persecution to continue. People are now much more likely to question the legitimacy of a field 'sport' which is the source of so much wildlife crime.

I attended the first Birders Against Wildlife Crime conference in Buxton in March. It was an almost instant sell-out (in terms of tickets, not principles) and was very successful. Badgers, bats and birds of prey all featured during the day. Plans are being made for Hen Harrier Day 2015 (Sunday 9 August) which promises to be bigger, better and different from last year's event (and hopefully drier!). Watch this space, and the BAWC website (www.birdersagainst.org), for details.

Opportunity knocks

When you get into campaigning mode you see the world in a different light – you see opportunities for your cause. The fact that there is currently an effort to get members of the public to vote for our national bird, and that the Hen Harrier made it through the first round to get into the list of 10 finalists, is such an opportunity.

I know that it would be a bit peculiar if Robin or Blackbird didn't triumph, and I'd guess that one of them will, but the avian recipient of this vote will not know it has won, and will not benefit at all from winning,



OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

An e-petition to ban driven grouse shooting has proved to be one of the most successful on the government website, and it's brought the plight of Hen Harrier to a much wider public.

“Plans are being made for Hen Harrier Day 2015 which promises to be bigger, better and different from last year's event – watch this space”

unless we elect Hen Harrier. Only this species will be better off if it 'wins', and that is because it most needs publicity and increased public awareness to give it a bit of a boost.

And honestly, wouldn't you love to see the looks on the faces of the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (who are, they say, ardent supporters of Hen Harrier) and the Moorland Association (some of whose members certainly aren't so friendly towards this bird) if this species, the most politically tangled of British birds, were to be elected? Go out and vote Hen Harrier!

But in another election, we do know that only one political party would support an outright ban on driven grouse shooting, and that is the Green Party. Why not question candidates in your local area on this matter, and a range of other environmental issues? ■



Do this in May

DO some research, give it some thought and please go out and vote on 7 May. I would much rather you voted for a party that I loathe (if you support their policies) than sit at home and simply don't bother.

But please also vote for Hen Harrier as our national bird. Your vote will certainly count, and if elected, this candidate will never let you down.

Who puts nature first?

As election day looms, **David Callahan** asks what each party's policies have to offer birders and examines their environmental policies to see which might best protect nature.

A pair of Peregrine Falcons perches at the top of Big Ben, overlooking the Houses of Parliament and other institutions of government. How will birds be affected by the outcome of the general election?

The coming election will probably be one of the most important ever in terms of the environment, as national and international legislation has been weakened by underfunding or by being rolled back, as a direct or indirect consequence of the global financial crisis which began in 2007.

Like it or not, birding and conservation have become inextricably linked to politics, and many key issues will be affected by the outcome of the general election. The introduction in Scotland of 'vicarious liability' – where an employer is held responsible for the actions of an employee – saw its first prosecution this year, but will any of the Westminster parties have the stomach to roll out such a law nationwide and hold all landowners responsible for the raptor-killing actions of their gamekeepers? Will the winning party support or fight European Union conservation law, and will the seemingly constant undermining of environmental protection laws at home be halted or increased?

With everything to play for by the major political parties, and several smaller parties beginning to look like contenders, it is anyone's guess as to who will win, with another coalition looking possible. If a less environmentally friendly government gets into power, will the balance be held by a more nature-friendly partner who will mediate their excesses?

Of course, the natural environment and protection of birds will not be the only issue to sway to your vote. All potential voters are advised to take each parties' entire manifestos into consideration, and weigh up their policies on the economy, education, health, the welfare state, workers' rights, defence, crime and housing – in fact, everything that could affect your own life and economic well-being. However, birders in particular may well be considering the protection of the environment a key issue, and are probably more likely to be ecologically literate than many other voters.

Birdwatch decided to examine each party's policies for environmental content, and assess just how bird friendly they are. We intentionally gave more space to the five national or near-national parties, but we summarise the more regionally concerned environmental policies of Plaid Cymru, the Scottish National Party, Sinn Féin and the Democratic Unionist Party on page 39, as readers in the more devolved or separate parts of the UK may consider these just as important in their local context.

We chose five basic criteria that are likely to be important to an environmentally conscious birder: overall protection of wildlife and the environment, and support for conservation; mitigation of climate change and encouragement of non-fossil fuel energy sources; animal welfare; control of hunting; and support of nature-friendly agriculture (in particular agri-environment schemes). We must stress that we have assessed the parties on their environmental policies only as they could be ascertained at the time of going to press, as none of the parties had yet published their detailed 2015 election manifestos. ■



Leader: **David Cameron**

CONSERVATIVE

"The core of Tory philosophy and the case for protecting the environment are the same," said Margaret Thatcher at the Conservative Party Conference in 1988. Prime Minister David Cameron then famously promised the "greenest government ever" at the 2010 election, but its recent reign as the dominant coalition partner has been considered a disaster for the environment in many quarters.

1. Conservation. The Conservative-led coalition has allowed more development of the countryside, resisted controls on air pollution, reduced spending on flood defences and encouraged fracking, despite massive outcry. It has also twice attempted to allow the sell-off of publicly owned forests to raise money for the Exchequer. However, the government has initiated the planting of around one million trees, equivalent to more than 20,000 acres of woodland. It says it is "determined to press ahead restoring habitats, cleaning rivers and improving the quality of our atmosphere". It is "determined that our flood defences will be always be strong enough to protect us against the ravages of a changing climate". Only 27 out of a potential 127 Marine Designated Areas have been given the go-ahead so far. The party questions EU laws which create better air, protect wildlife and clean beaches.

2. Climate change. Earlier this year, a group of Tory modernisers committed to a decarbonisation target and improved flood resilience by 2020; however, the causes of recent floods remain unaddressed. The Conservatives have cut back on energy efficiency to concentrate on offshore wind farms (which have doubled under the coalition) and solar panels. Despite being the party which helped to champion international efforts to ban CFC gas emissions in the 1980s, it has now pledged to cut what David Cameron called "green crap" such as onshore wind farms.

3. Animal welfare. Controversially, Badger culls will be extended across the whole country, as the party has deemed trials a success, in spite of the advice from its own scientific advisors. It claims the "highest standards of animal welfare in Europe" and encourages other countries to adhere to the phasing out of battery farms and sow stalls for pigs.

5. Hunting. The Conservatives will try to repeal the fox hunting ban if the party wins May's general election, offering a 'free vote' on the matter. David Cameron again: "The Hunting Act has done nothing for animal welfare."

6. Agriculture. It believes the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) needs to be reformed. It has also helped institute reforms to EU Common Fisheries Policy, bringing a binding commitment to sustainable management of stocks. The party says that the cutting of 'red tape' (that is, the controls that are meant ensure best practice) is the way forward for British agriculture. ■

REFERENCES

<http://press.conservatives.com/post/98715980170/liz-truss-speech-to-conservative-party-conference>



Leader: **Ed Miliband**

LABOUR

The Labour Party appears to be getting its environmental policies match fit, and hasn't shirked at presenting its green credentials ahead of polling or the publication of its manifesto.

1. Conservation. The last Labour government committed to developing the network of Marine Protected Areas, and the party intends to continue building on this, according to press reports. It also promises a review of how to prevent raptor persecution and briefly mentions the declining Hen Harrier in its recent *Labour: Protecting Animals* pamphlet, but concrete proposals are awaited.

2. Climate change. Labour will stick to the UK's legally binding targets for carbon reduction, 'decarbonising' by 2030. Borrowing powers are to be given to the Green Investment Bank to support investment in green business. A climate change 'adaptation plan' will be introduced, and there will be a prioritisation of flood prevention.

Labour promises to create a million new hi-tech green jobs by 2025, along with a million low-carbon jobs by 2025; it also wants to decarbonise electricity by 2030, and insulate five million homes over the next decade. It wants to make cycling safer and partially encourage public sector public transport.

3. Animal welfare. The party wants to ban the use of wild animals in circuses, and end the government's "ineffective and inhumane" Badger culls. Wildlife crime will be tackled, including moves to reduce animal cruelty on shooting estates. Labour says that it will lead international efforts to combat illegal wildlife crime.

4. Hunting. Labour says it will protect the Hunting Act and maintain the ban on hunting with dogs, but seems unlikely to further regulate Pheasant or driven grouse shooting.

5. Agriculture. Labour has promised a long-term strategy to protect farming standards and food production, but is unclear about the details so far. It has suggested that it will scrap farmers' exemption from business rate taxes, a policy which is likely to have serious economic repercussions for both small and large concerns, but might also have the more positive side effect of encouraging farmers to take up remunerative agri-environment schemes and green subsidies. ■

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Liberal
Democrats

Leader: Nick Clegg

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

The party trumpeted its 'Green Manifesto' earlier this year, declaring that it would build a "green backbone" around which Lib Dem appeal would be constructed. It has come up with a well-thought-out environmental policy – but how many will trust the party after it famously retreated from many of its popular election promises in coalition?

1. Conservation. It proposes a Nature Bill with legal targets for biodiversity, clean air and water, the extension of Right to Roam and designation of new nature reserves. It has jointly planted one million trees in the first government tree-planting programme since the 1970s, but failed to robustly oppose the threat to national forests posed by their potential sale to private investors.

2. Climate change. The party supports a 'decarbonisation target' for the energy sector, wants to encourage 'green investment' by relaxing borrowing rules and opposes further airport construction in the South-East. It plans to create a new Office of Environmental Responsibility and a Natural Capital Committee, as well as proposing a 'War on Waste' to tackle resource inefficiency and encourage legally binding waste reduction targets and a ban on recyclables in landfill. A 5p plastic bag charge will be introduced, and the party proposes a national network of charging points for electric cars, with only low emission vehicles on the road after 2040. It plans more walking, cycling and public transport-oriented developments, and will encourage non-fossil fuel energy supplies to "reduce total UK energy demand by 50 per cent by 2030, including retrofitting one million homes every year". It says it will create 200,000 green jobs in renewable energy, and has "already doubled the amount of electricity generated from offshore wind".

3. Animal welfare. The Liberal Democrats intend to bring Britain in line with a new European strategy to improve the welfare of farm, zoo and laboratory animals.

4. Hunting. The party will tighten up controls on the import of hunting trophies. It also managed to block the government's plan to relax the 2004 hunting ban last year.

5. Agriculture. Many Lib Dems are in favour of Common Agricultural Policy reform to reduce its costs. The party's European manifesto says that it "endorses support for rural communities and businesses specifically in order to protect the natural environment and enhance biodiversity, landscape and heritage, water management and local economic activity including tourism". ■

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www.libdems.org.uk/environment;
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Leader: Natalie Bennett

THE GREEN PARTY

It will come as no surprise that the Greens have the most wildlife and environmentally friendly policies of all the parties with elected MPs, which large numbers of voters agree with. However, many also express doubts about their inexperience in government and the practicalities of some of their policies. There has been a 'Green surge' in voter support in polls, mirroring the increase in popularity of the formerly fringe UKIP, and the Green Party had a robust, well-rounded manifesto for the European elections.

1. Conservation. The Greens will seek to strengthen the EU Habitats Directive and support Natura 2000 protection areas. The reintroduction of native species will be encouraged, while tighter restrictions on invasives will be put in place. Internationally, the Greens will push for the ending of whale hunts, while at home licensing will be introduced for wild plant collectors. The party would also replace VAT with an environmental damage tax, and introduce a 'new resource' tax on wood, metal and minerals.

2. Climate change. The party intends to move rapidly from a fossil fuel economy to renewables, demanding reductions in emissions of at least 90 per cent by 2030. It will also step up demands for international co-operation in setting new environmental standards. Upland water conservation is imperative in the party's plans, thus firming up flood defences. A hike in taxes on roads and cars may be a deal-breaker for many mainstream voters. The Greens will insist on clear limits to air and water pollution. Fracking would be curtailed, and further 'extreme' explorations for fossil fuels will be prevented.

3. Animal welfare. The Greens want CCTV in slaughterhouses, higher standards for farm animals and tougher regulations on animal transport. The party also desires an end to all animal experimentation, with immediate action to stop non-medical experiments and factory farming. Absolutely against the Badger cull.

4. Hunting. The party opposes bloodsports and will work quickly to make them illegal. It will also improve on current legislation and, importantly, intends to ban driven grouse shooting.

5. Agriculture. The Green Party will encourage "more pollinator-friendly agriculture" by reducing pesticide use, and will "reform the Common Agricultural Policy to allow farmers to let their land re-wild, rather than forcing them to continue uneconomic farming practices where they do not wish to, in order only to receive subsidies". The CAP will be reformed with payments redirected to smaller farms. However, a proposed ban on genetically modified food from the whole of Europe may be inadvisable and unworkable. ■

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Manifesto for the European Parliament elections 2014: Real Change:
www.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/European%20Manifesto%202014.pdf



Leader: Nigel Farage

UKIP

At the time of going to press, the constantly changing statements of UKIP's candidates and leadership on the environment remain confusing. From what we can glean from the party's public proclamations, it largely denies climate change and seems to want to take back a lot of the headway that conservationists and environmentalists have made in the post-war years. There is certainly no official long-term vision for nature, and as far as the 'greening' of the economy goes, UKIP seems more concerned with the immediate costs of household fuel rather than having any long-term sustainable strategy for the nation's energy.

1. Conservation. UKIP has intimated that it will ban all tree-felling, and intends to provide 100 per cent grants for tree planting. It will establish a 'Marine Environment Corps' to collect rubbish, and intends to create a much cleaner river system. However, actual policies seem to vary from candidate to candidate. Some UKIP candidates encourage campaigning against deforestation abroad. The party says that its "priority is to preserve the wildlife habitat of endangered species, particularly by replenishing sources of clean drinking water required for their survival". It will ban certain pesticides and chemicals from wildlife habitats, and will sponsor an nationwide survey of plants.

2. Climate change. UKIP denies the scientific consensus on climate change, despite the overwhelming evidence. This head-in-the-sand attitude extends to energy policies, which involve not providing any subsidies for wind farms (which it considers "loopy") or solar arrays. UKIP say that it "will abolish the Department of Energy and Climate Change and scrap green subsidies"; the party also intends to abolish green taxes to reduce fuel bills.

3. Animal welfare. The party intends to abolish export of animals for slaughter. Though UKIP appears to have no policy on the Badger cull, some of its representatives were certainly in favour of the early trials.

4. Hunting. UKIP appears to be largely pro-hunting as a 'tradition', with its leader being a keen attender of fox hunts. It has signalled that it will reinstate hunting with dogs if it achieves power.

5. Agriculture. As it intends to leave the EU, the country would also leave the CAP, after which UKIP would maintain its own Single Farm Payment to provide farming subsidies. The UK would also leave the Common Fisheries Policy, with British Territorial Waters being reinstated. Foreign boats would be able to apply for licences once these continental shelf fisheries became restocked. UKIP seems to have no policy on using protected areas at sea to help with the reviving of Atlantic fish stocks. ■

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Leader: Leanne Wood PLAID CYMRU



1. Conservation. Plaid Cymru has awarded £400,000 in conservation grants, and is quite outspoken in its support of increasing the number of Marine Conservation Zones.

2. Climate change. The party believes that this is the overarching issue of our times, and consequently seeks to improve energy efficiency by encouraging renewables and supporting a decentralised energy grid.

3. Animal welfare. No official policy, but it recommends CCTV in slaughterhouses and backed the Europe-wide ban on using laboratory animals for cosmetics testing. Generally in favour of the Badger cull.

4. Hunting. Supported major parties in their attempt to scrap the limit of the number of dogs used to flush Foxes.

5. Agriculture. The party is big on localised food chains and sustainable agriculture.

Leader: Nicola Sturgeon

SCOTTISH NATIONAL PARTY



1. Conservation. Wants control of marine conservation transferred to the Scottish Parliament, and supports protection areas.

2. Climate change. Expects a rise in employment and investment in renewables, and encourages 'zero-waste' energy technology. Has serious ambitions to reduce emissions (80 per cent by 2050), and plans to ban nuclear energy.

3. Animal welfare. The party would like Scotland to match EU standards and see better enforcement of legislation, but the Badger cull hasn't impacted on Scotland yet, and therefore its position is unclear.

4. Hunting. The SNP co-sponsored the ban on hunting with dogs along with Labour.

5. Agriculture. The party says it is working to improve fish stocks and lessen discards, and wants a better share of funding for agri-environment schemes and sustainable forestry. However, former leader Alex Salmond has a record of allowing some developers to overrule environmental legislation.



Leader: Gerry Adams SINN FEIN



1. Conservation. Encouraged the creation of Marine Conservation Zones to preserve fisheries in a consultation recently. Also supports EU agri-environment schemes for forestry and heather

moorland management.

2. Climate change. Has criticised the lack of ambition in the current government's climate change actions, particularly on emissions reductions.

3. Animal welfare. Has come out strongly against welfare abuses, and appealed for stronger legislation.

4. Hunting. Has been actively involved in hunt sabotage in the past, and supports restrictions on bullfighting in the EU, as well as on stag and fox hunting, and hare coursing.

5. Agriculture. Largely follows the EU's current policies on sustainability.

Leader: Peter Robinson

DEMOCRATIC UNIONIST PARTY



1. Conservation. Ambitiously, the DUP wants to halt the current declines in wildlife by 2020. Promotion of 'green' space and wildlife corridors a priority.

2. Climate change. Unionists notoriously stood by their environment minister when it was revealed that he was a climate change 'sceptic'. However, the party wants 40 per cent of Northern Ireland's energy to come from renewables by 2020.

3. Animal welfare. Wholeheartedly supported the Badger cull while also supporting the idea that Northern Ireland should become a "zero tolerance zone" for animal abuse.

4. Hunting. A minority of DUP MPs supports the current banning of hunting with dogs, while more would have it repealed.

5. Agriculture. Wants to stop the declines in farmland birds, and expand allotments. Is against centralised EU fisheries policy and discards, and appears to be in favour of Marine Protected Areas for the benefit of the fishing industry.

The swan that wasn't



Since seeing his first brood of so-called Polish Mute Swans many years ago, **Moss Taylor** has long been fascinated by this uncommon colour variant. But what exactly is a Polish Mute Swan?



The name 'Polish Mute Swan' was first coined by London poultry dealers in the first half of the 19th century to describe juvenile Mute Swans imported from the Baltic that were all white, instead of the usual grey-brown. In addition to the white plumage, they were also characterised by having pale pinkish-grey bills, legs and feet, as opposed to the more familiar black.

The birds' appearance was so striking that William Yarrell, the renowned zoologist and author of *A History of British Birds*, was convinced they represented a new, previously undescribed species which he referred to as Polish Swan. In 1838 he gave it the scientific name *Cygnus immutabilis*, in

view of its unchanging plumage.

While Polish Swans were relatively common in eastern Europe, they were always considered unusual or even rare in a wild state in England, but following Yarrell's acceptance of them as a separate species, they appeared as such in the early county avifaunas. Stevenson devoted no fewer than 10 pages to them in his three-volume *Birds of Norfolk*, although he was aware of only nine records between 1839 and 1868, all obtained during the winter months.

Unravelling the mystery

Doubt was first cast on Polish Swan as a separate species by Dutch zoologist Dr Westerman, who was Director of the

This female Mute Swan of the Polish variety was discovered at Cley, Norfolk, in February of this year. It may well be from a 2008 brood that included three Polish females.

The difference between Polish and normal chicks can be seen clearly here. The bird on the left is all white and has a paler, pinky-grey bill, unlike the typically plumaged cygnet on the right, with its familiar grey plumage and black bill.



This first-winter Polish Mute Swan lacks the grey-brown plumage of the more regular immature birds. You can also see how much paler the bill is (compare to the bird on the left below).

Zoological Gardens in Amsterdam. Based on his observations of a brood of cygnets in The Netherlands, half of which were white and the other half grey, he correctly concluded that it was simply due to a form of leucism. Stevenson found it hard to accept this idea, as his large circle of contacts among the local swan herds had never come across any white cygnets, and nor had any been reported by other observers in the county.

Nowadays these white birds are known to be leucistic examples of Mute Swan, the white plumage from the time of hatching being transmitted genetically. Laboratory research has demonstrated that the pigment deficiency is carried as a recessive gene on the sex chromosomes.

In a reversal of the situation in mammals, male birds possess two X chromosomes and females one X and one Y. As the Y chromosome



The male Mute Swan on the right is of the Polish variety, and is accompanying a normal cob. The difference in leg colour can be clearly seen, with the right-hand bird having a much paler, pinky-grey leg.

is genetically 'silent' as far as this particular gene is concerned, all female Mute Swans that carry the recessive gene for melanin deficiency will be of the Polish variety, while male Mute Swans will have to have inherited the abnormal recessive gene from each parent to show the all-white plumage.

Considering that natural selection would appear to favour the grey-brown cygnets, through improved camouflage and a reduced likelihood of attack by parents or other adult Mute Swans, it is perhaps surprising that 'Polish' birds have become fairly common throughout much of Europe and even among the introduced population in North America.

Two factors may have played a part in this, at least in Europe. Firstly, Polish Mute Swans were selectively bred in The Netherlands by 'swan farmers' for selling as ornamental birds, as there was no market for the normal grey-brown cygnets. Secondly, in countries where swans were considered a delicacy, the grey-brown young birds were targeted for their tender flesh, compared with the adults, meaning the Polish swans were ignored as they were not recognised as being immatures. Nevertheless, this still does not explain why Polish Mute Swans have remained so scarce in Britain and Ireland.

In Britain

In recent years, I have been lucky enough to come across one or two broods of Polish cygnets in north



The all-white Polish Mute Swan cygnet can be easily separated from its more usual siblings. Now known to be a form of leucism, such birds were once thought to be a separate species.

MOSS TAYLOR

Norfolk, at both Cley and Felbrigg. During the summer of 2014, a pair of Mute Swans nested at Felbrigg Lake, and of the six cygnets, all of which have survived, three were of the all-white Polish variety with pale pinkish-grey legs and bill.

Unfortunately I was unable to ascertain whether the cob (male) of the breeding pair was a Polish Mute Swan, but the pen (female), which is still in attendance with the six immatures, has black legs and feet and therefore cannot be carrying the abnormal gene on her X chromosome (if she was she would show the characteristics of the Polish variety). By deduction, therefore, the abnormal gene must have been transmitted by

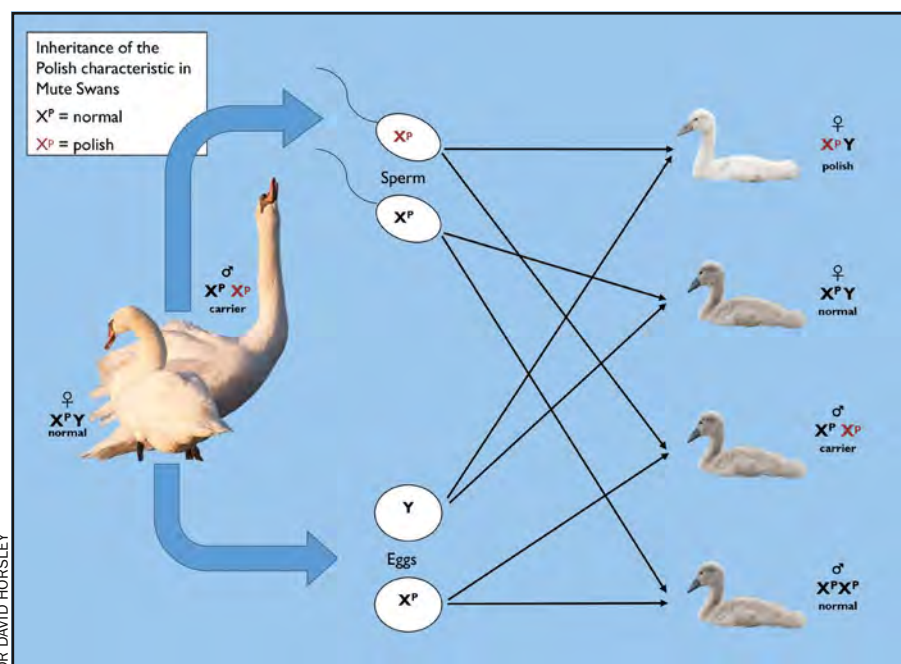
the cob and the three Polish immatures must all be female.

In 2008, a brood of four cygnets at Cley included one Polish Mute Swan. More recently, in February this year, I was delighted to discover that the adult pen of a pair near Dauke's hide at Cley was of the Polish variety, and it may well be the one that was hatched in 2008.

As far as I am aware, a survey to assess the distribution and frequency of Polish Mute Swans in Britain has never been carried out, and I believe that this would make a simple yet fascinating study. Polish Mute Swans are easy to distinguish from the more regular variety, being pure white from the time of hatching. They can be recognised at all ages by their pale pinkish-grey (as opposed to black) legs and feet, even in flight. The colour of the bill also remains paler than that of normal Mute Swans, at least during the first year of life, but after that is virtually indistinguishable. ■

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Dr David Horsley for assistance in the preparation of this article, in particular for the illustration of the inheritance of the sex-linked recessive gene.



DR DAVID HORSLEY

The recessive gene that causes the colour deficiency is carried on the X chromosome. Male birds require both X chromosomes to carry the gene, whereas if a female's one X chromosome carries the gene, it will be of the Polish variety.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

MOSS Taylor would be delighted to receive any reports from readers of Polish Mute Swans seen this summer, or indeed any historical records that are tucked away in notebooks.

The basic information needed would be location, colour type of parents and number of Polish cygnets in each brood. Any photographs would also be most welcome. All contributions will be acknowledged and the results will be published at the end of the year.

Please send records to moss.taylor@btinternet.com or by post to 4 Heath Road, Sheringham, Norfolk NR26 8JH. ■

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Red-spotted and White-spotted Bluethroats

PHOTO GUIDE

1



CHRIS ROWEIKS (WWW.BIRDMAGENCY.COM)

1 Male (left) and female (right) White-spotted Bluethroats (Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, 19 May 2012). This wonderful portrait shows breeding male and female White-spotted Bluethroats side by side. Although the female is an attractive bird with subtle blue hues in the breast and malar region and some orange visible in the tail, it is the male with his deep shining blue throat that really catches the eye. The obvious white spot on the male is ample proof of its identity, as is its German breeding location.

PROFILE



ANDY STODDART is Vice Chairman of the Rarities Committee and has many years' birding experience. He is also author of several books and ID papers.

Rare enough to be exciting but regular enough to be a real possibility, the discovery of a Bluethroat adds colour to any day in the field. Both red-spotted and white-spotted forms are recorded in Britain, chiefly as passage migrants, but on rare occasions the species has also bred. Spring males are unmistakable, but autumn birds, especially females and immatures, muddy the waters. *Andy Stoddart's* in-depth advice will help you to age, sex and where possible identify to subspecies any individuals you are lucky enough to find on your local patch.

BASIC PRINCIPLES

Bluethroats tick all the right boxes. They are regular enough to be a realistic finding target but rare enough to be genuinely exciting when you do find one, and to increase your odds, you have two chances every year, in spring and autumn. They are usually shy and elusive, but a good view of one, particularly a spring male, is a memorable occasion indeed.

There are extra layers of interest too, for Bluethroat exhibits not just great age and sex-related plumage variation, but occurs in a variety of subspecies and plumage types across its extensive range. Every Bluethroat is worth the closest study, both to enjoy its sheer beauty and character and also to identify it as precisely as possible.

Bluethroat taxonomy is complex, with around 10 subspecies generally recognised, but two are of most relevance in Britain.

Red-spotted Bluethroat

Nominate *svecica* – known as Red-spotted Bluethroat – has a very large range, breeding in Scandinavia and right across northern Russia. It extends even further than this, though. Along with Arctic Warbler, Northern Wheatear and Yellow Wagtail, it is one of the few Palearctic passerines to breed in Alaska. Throughout its range it nests in low subalpine scrub.

The history of Red-spotted Bluethroat in Britain is a fascinating one. It was barely recorded in Britain until, on 12 September 1884, two London doctors, Fred and George Power, walked out to Blakeney Point in an easterly wind. To their astonishment they encountered at least 80, and perhaps as many as 100, of this near-mythical bird.

“Bluethroat taxonomy is complex, with around 10 subspecies generally recognised, but two are of most relevance in Britain”

Although these numbers were never repeated, Bluethroats were then recorded regularly there and elsewhere until the 1960s, since when they have appeared rather less frequently. At the same time, they have started to appear more often in late spring, and some large ‘falls’ have occurred at this season, mainly in Scotland.

Today, this subspecies is a regular though highly unpredictable scarce migrant, almost exclusively in the second half of May and early June and again in September. Most occur in the Northern Isles, but anywhere on the east coast or the far South-West could still produce one.

White-spotted Bluethroat

The subspecies *cyanecula* – White-spotted Bluethroat – breeds in central Europe from northern France to European Russia. Unlike its northern cousin, however, this is not a montane breeder, preferring instead low-lying wetland scrub habitats.

This is a somewhat variable form. Birds from western France are a little smaller (and sometimes separated as *namnetum*), while some adult males (so-called ‘wolff’ variants) show no white breast spot. To complicate matters, a few show a pale orange breast spot, inviting confusion with Red-spotted Bluethroat.

Also unaccounted for by the current taxonomy is a montane population in central Spain, notionally included within *cyanecula* but actually quite distinct,

with adult males showing a diffuse head pattern, a restricted dark chest band and generally lacking a white breast spot. The name ‘*azuricollis*’ (‘Gredos Bluethroat’) has been proposed for this population.

White-spotted Bluethroat has always been rare in Britain, much more so than Red-spotted, and it still hovers just below true rarity status. A large population has recently become established as close as The Netherlands, but despite this proximity, White-spotted remains a hard bird to find here, seemingly reluctant to make the short crossing of the southern North Sea.

Nevertheless, occurrences are increasing, albeit very slowly, and this subspecies has now held territory and even bred in south-east and eastern England. Despite its slow advance here, it is widely tipped as a future colonist of wetland habitats. Its early spring migration means that British sightings peak at the end of March, but its autumn status is almost unknown.

Other possibilities

Although only Red-spotted and White-spotted Bluethroats are on the British list, there are other theoretical possibilities. In southern European Russia, *cyanecula* is replaced by *volgae*, which in turn is replaced by *pallidogularis* from south-east European Russia to south-west Siberia. Given that other species from these regions are regular vagrants to Britain, it seems likely

that both of these forms (and perhaps particularly *pallidogularis*) are reaching us, if only occasionally.

Identification

The separation of spring adult male Red-spotted and White-spotted Bluethroats is generally straightforward – the clue is in the name! However, some White-spotted (but apparently not Red-spotted) can lack a spot altogether, while a very few may show a weak orange one. Any early spring ‘red-spotted’ Bluethroat, particularly one in wetland habitat, is more likely to be a variant White-spotted than a true Red-spotted.

The identification of spring females is more problematic. Some may be bright, male-like birds and so offer some clues, but many will be duller and not identifiable to subspecies. Circumstantial evidence then comes into play. In crude terms, a late March bird in a reedbed is almost certain to be a White-spotted, while a late spring bird on the east coast will almost certainly be a Red-spotted.

In autumn, only adult males are identifiable to subspecies. However, circumstantial evidence is once again helpful. The pattern of occurrences strongly suggests that almost all autumn birds are Red-spotted. The dominance of the Northern Isles and the coincidence of records with influxes of other Scandinavian passerines is compelling. However, any White-spotted will be hard to detect against this background.

The identification of vagrant subspecies is highly problematic. Variation is clinal and identification is only likely to be feasible with some adult males in spring, and perhaps then only in the hand. Biometrics might provide useful evidence for any trapped bird, however. ■

2



MARKUS VARESVOO (WWW.BIRDPHOTO.FI)

2 Red-spotted Bluethroat (Inari, Finland, 4 June 2005). A singing Red-spotted Bluethroat is the undisputed jewel of northern Fennoscandia. Despite the name, however, the central breast spot is more orange than red. Although the occasional variant male White-spotted Bluethroat can show a weak orange breast spot, the rich orange of this bird identifies it readily as a Red-spotted. The low tundra scrub habitat (and the northern Finnish location) are entirely typical.

3



REIN HOFMAN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

3 White-spotted Bluethroat (Groningen, The Netherlands, 11 April 2008). Some male White-spotted Bluethroats can show a reduced white central breast spot which, as here, can be difficult to see. The white can be restricted to the feather bases and 'disappear' under the overlying blue feathers. Some birds (the so-called 'wolff' variants) lack white in the breast altogether and are uniformly blue in this area. The orange basal panels in the tail are also shown to good effect here.



4 Bluethroat (Palencia, Spain, 22 May 2011). Although usually subsumed within White-spotted Bluethroat, birds from the central mountains of Spain have quite a distinct appearance. This male is typical, showing a brown-washed, and therefore rather weak, supercilium, and an entirely blue breast. This range-restricted montane form resembles the Caucasian form *magna* more than it does White-spotted Bluethroat and is perhaps best regarded as a separate subspecies; the name '*azuricollis*' has been proposed.



5 Bluethroat (Aragats, Armenia, 14 June 2001). This male shows a completely blue breast with no central spot. Although some White-spotted can look like this, this bird's rocky perch hints at a montane location rather than a lowland wetland. As the location of the photo reveals, this striking male is of the Caucasian and Turkish form *magna*. It is a restricted-range mountain form and shares some similarity with the equally isolated mountain birds of central Spain.

6



SEBASTIAN MUNTER (WWW.BIRDIMAGENCY.COM)

6 Female Red-spotted Bluethroat (Dovrefjell, Norway, 8 August 2014). Female Bluethroats are very variable. Some show quite extensive blue in the breast and malar region and might even be mistaken for males, while others show no visible blue at all. This bird is very much towards the dull end of the spectrum and is technically unidentifiable to form from this photograph but, as often is the case with Bluethroats, the location and date provide the clue. This bird was pictured in Norway in summer so can safely be assumed to be a Red-spotted.

7



REIN HOFMAN (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

7 Female White-spotted Bluethroat (Groningen, The Netherlands, 24 August 2008). This female is a little brighter with some pale blue visible throughout the malar region and again (just visible) in the upper breast. It is, however, unidentifiable to form from the image alone, but the Dutch lowland location and the August date leave no room for doubt – it is a White-spotted Bluethroat.

8



PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDMAGES.COM)

8 Bluethroat (Dungarvan, Co Waterford, December 2011). Bluethroats in Britain are most commonly encountered in autumn so this December bird is most unusual. Migrant Bluethroats are generally shy, darting away into cover, but with patience, they may emerge into view to show their long legs and perky, Robin-like demeanour and, beautifully captured here, their strong face pattern, intricately marked breast and malar regions and flashes of orange in the tail base. Autumn birds like this can be aged as first-winter – note the prominent pale greater covert tips – and a bird with this much blue in the breast is likely to be a male. However, it cannot readily be identified to form and would just have to be recorded as ‘Bluethroat’.

9



TONY MILLS (WWW.NOTJUSTBIRDS.COM)

9 Bluethroat (Porth Hellick, St Mary's, Scilly, 17 October 2011). This autumn bird, lacking prominent gingery tips to the greater coverts, shows a wing pattern suggestive of an adult, and the breast pattern comprising a band of blue and black feathering would be typical of an adult female. There is a possibility that it is an atypically dull-breasted first-year male with unusually reduced buff covert tips but, as its appearance is typical of an adult female, this is the most parsimonious explanation.

10



STEVE MORGAN

10 Bluethroat (Kilnsea, East Yorkshire, 22 September 2007). This first-winter Bluethroat – aged by the prominent gingery tips to the greater coverts – is about as dull as they get. Unlike the Irish bird in photo 8 which shows a little blue in the breast, this bird shows no blue at all and is basically a somewhat drab, grey-brown bird. It is surely a female. The strong face and breast patterns can still be seen, however. In life, the combination of running along the ground and lurking under deep cover or perhaps a flight view showing orange tail panels would have provided the first clue that it was a Bluethroat.

11



REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

11 Siberian Rubythroat (Fair Isle, Shetland, 26 October 2005). This bird shows the typical long legs, dumpy shape, half-cocked tail and strong face pattern of a Bluethroat. Another dull autumn bird, then? Wrong! It pays not to be complacent, for this is no Bluethroat. It is instead the closely related but infinitely rarer Siberian Rubythroat – still perhaps the rarity-hunter's greatest prize. A glimpse of a 'potential Bluethroat' in late autumn may, with a stroke of astonishing luck, lead to one of these beauties; note the plainer breast and lack of orange in the tail.

Find your own Bluethroats

AS a species that is becoming ever thinner on the ground in Britain, there are no sites that can guarantee Bluethroat nowadays. Having said that, its traditional haunts still stand a chance of turning up drift migrants in autumn and 'overshooting' birds in spring.

Red-spotted Bluethroat is the most likely form to be found on the east coast and Northern Isles, as it migrates back and forth from Scandinavia. Southern and south-eastern parts of England are more likely to turn up the **white-spotted** forms, particularly in spring when they may even be singing.

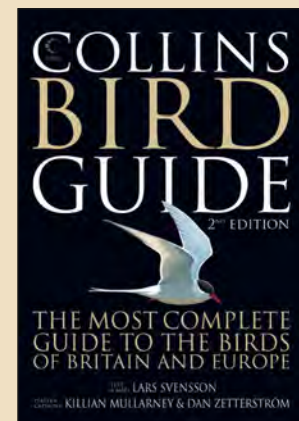
Their current scarcity means it is a good idea to keep an eye on BirdGuides.com for reports of any falls, single arrivals or lingering individuals – the species can hang around for a few days in appropriate marshy habitat. Remember that although primarily a wetland breeder, Bluethroat can show up in headland scrub and muddy fields on migration.

In autumn, Shetland (HU 3960) and Orkney (HY 5705) generally produce birds, and these can be almost anywhere where there is cover on those rather bare islands. Parties of birders often visit the islands during the key months of September and October, and will share information both locally and nationally.

Away from these somewhat distant locales (for many), spring birds are relatively often found at some marshland reserves. It is worth trying the extensive coastal reedbeds and ditches of the north Norfolk coast in spring: Holme (TF 7043) and Cley (TG 0444) may be best, but inland Welney (TL 5293) has also turned up trumps. Elsewhere, head to Spurn, East Yorkshire (TA 3910), and the Northumberland coast and islands – even inland sites in London and Kent have occasionally produced individuals. At the far western end of the country, Scilly (SV 8811) usually produces a Bluethroat or two every autumn.

Seeking this species in Britain is always a gamble, and in Ireland it's an official rarity, but you can maximise your chances by following the news and keeping an eye on the weather. If there is a southerly blow in April or May in the south, or an east wind from August to October on the east coast, then you stand a good chance of hearing about a bird in time to go and see it – or perhaps even finding your own at a likely location. Bear in mind, however, that spring singers are still potential breeding birds despite their scarcity, and try to avoid disturbing any which are holding territory. ■

FURTHER READING



Collins Bird Guide by Lars Svensson, Killian Mullarney and Dan Zetterström (HarperCollins)
With expanded text and additional colour illustrations, the second edition of this hugely successful guide is a must for every birder. It provides all the information needed to identify any species at any time of the year, covering size, habitat, range, identification and voice. Accompanying every species' entry is a distribution map and illustrations showing each species in all major plumages.
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? Quiz bird



KEEN to find your own Bluethroat in spring, you're familiar with it in all its plumages and – even better – have boned up on vocalisations. Turning a corner on the boardwalk at your local wetland reserve, you hear a tell-tale song, raise your bins and – bingo! – there it is: a singing male Bluethroat.

Wait a minute, though – isn't it supposed to have a white or a red spot on its throat? Try as you might, you can't seem to see this feature. Using Andy Stoddart's definitive guide to the species it should still be possible to identify this bird to form, even if the actual subspecies might be impossible. Going through the different subtle plumage features, you should eventually alight on the correct identification, though it might be tough going.

How to enter

Once you think you have the right answer, let us know at bit.ly/bw275BluethroatQuiz. Be quick, though, as the competition closes on 8 May! The answer will be available online at www.birdwatch.co.uk/win from 11 May, and the first randomly chosen reader with the correct answer will win a copy of *Advanced Bird ID Guide* by Nils Van Duivendijk. ■





Counting for birds



Now in its 22nd year, the British Trust for Ornithology's Breeding Bird Survey has revealed much information

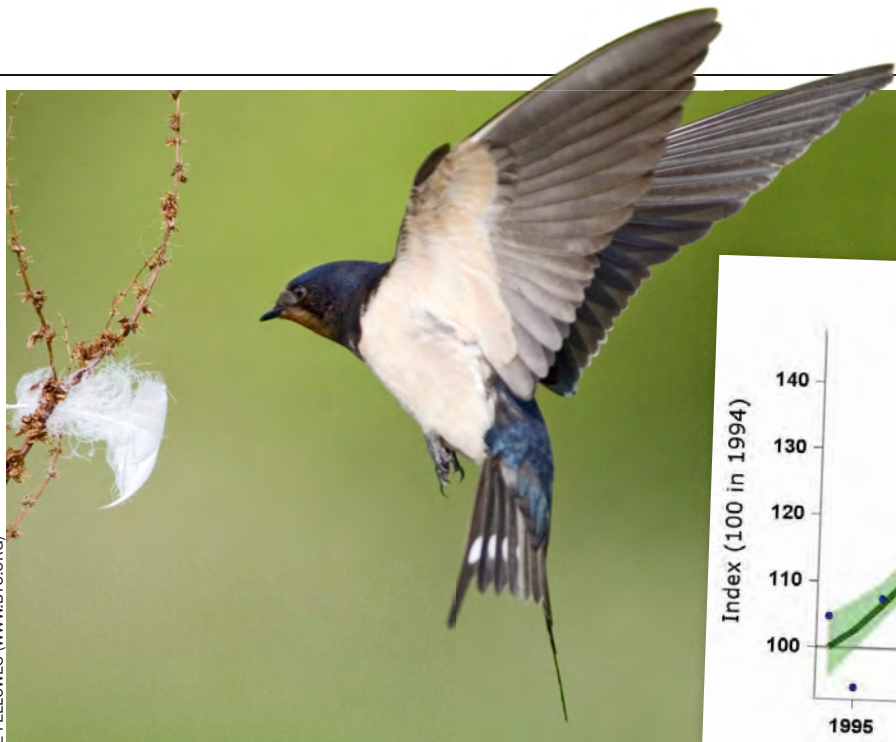
on our breeding birds, and such long-term monitoring of the UK's common breeding species is vital to their conservation, says the survey's national organiser **Sarah Harris**.

Currently on the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern, Whinchat has suffered a population crash in the UK of 55 per cent, according to the latest Breeding Bird Survey data. This could put the species on the Red List.

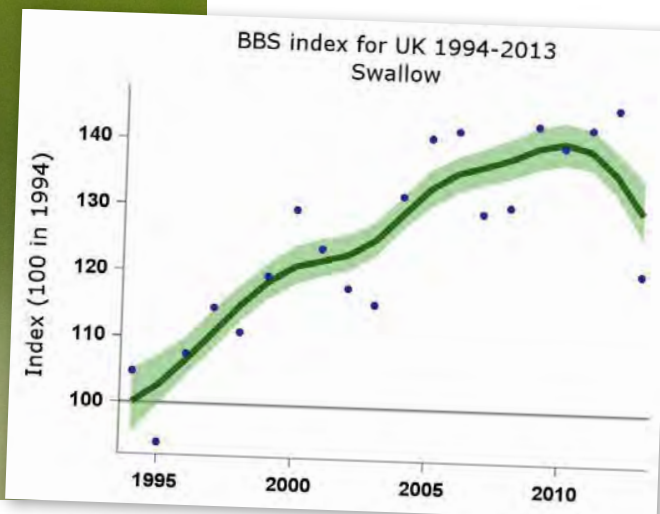
Ever wonder how Common Whitethroats or Eurasian Curlews are faring? What influences the number of Common Redstarts or Willow Warblers successfully returning from their wintering grounds back to the UK to breed? Or which species should join the UK Red List? Or, more broadly, what the future might hold for our breeding birds?

Analysis of data from the Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) has shed some light on these questions and more. The BBS is in its 22nd consecutive year – an amazing feat for a large-scale volunteer survey. Bird counts from the 3,650 1-km squares covered in 2014 will be used to produce updated population trends for more than 110 species across the UK, and will be published later this year.

Beyond revealing changes, such data can also help us understand why a population is changing. These trends also influence policy, direct further research, help measure progress against national goals and international obligations, such as the European Union's biodiversity directives, and assist with decisions on where species need to sit on the UK Lists of Birds of Conservation Concern.



Swallow (left) enjoyed an increase in numbers between 1995 and 2010, but since then it has declined (see graph below). Could this be due to rainfall on its African wintering grounds?



Monitoring the residents ...

Some of our resident birds are doing very well. Species such as Goldfinch and Nuthatch are on the increase, not to mention the impressive growth in Little Egret and Red Kite populations and distribution. Others – Grey Partridge and Corn Bunting, for example – are in trouble. Long-term monitoring helps us understand why some species are doing well and others not, and if there is any relationship between the population changes of species that share elements of their life history.

Willow Tit's decline – 83 per cent between 1995 and 2012 – has triggered research, but the underlying reasons for it remain largely unknown. Deer browsing and shading in some woodlands is thought to have reduced the quality of low vegetation used by Willow Tits for foraging. The increase of dominant tit species such as Great

Tit is another factor that may be important at a local level.

... and the migrants

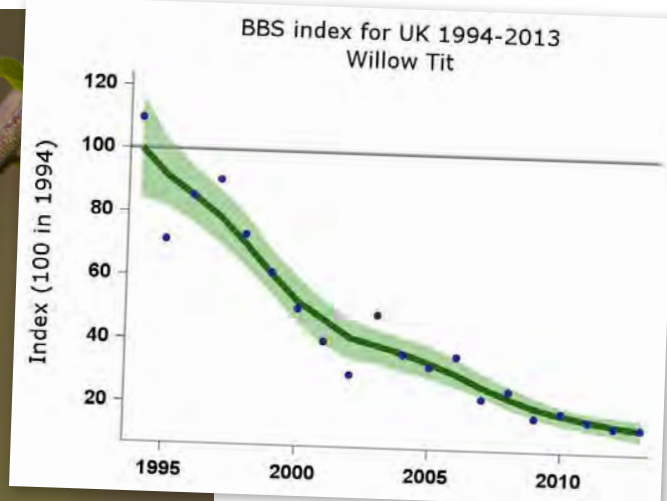
Some of 'our' summer breeding birds divide their year between the UK and wintering grounds in Africa, so the reasons behind their population changes are all the more complex and difficult to understand. What is influencing the change in abundance for a given species, and where do these factors operate?

Data from the BBS and its predecessor the Common Birds Census have revealed the relationship between certain species and rainfall levels in Africa. The amount of rainfall on the wintering grounds and stopover sites affects food availability such as insects and berries.

A recent study has shown that how much rain there has been has a significant effect on the year-to-year population fluctuations in nine long-distance

migrants. Six of these species – Common Redstart, European Turtle Dove, Reed and Sedge Warblers, Common Whitethroat and Blackcap – winter in the arid zone of West Africa. This region also supports species stopping over to rest and refuel on their way further south; Willow Warbler, Swallow and Tree Pipit are three such species. Population trends for all of these were shown to be positively affected by rainfall.

Further south, the conditions are wetter, with tropical forests which may act as a buffer against the effects of low rainfall. Spotted Flycatcher was the only species where the greater the rainfall levels, the more positive the effect on population change. Strangely, Garden Warbler and Tree Pipit populations were negatively affected by rainfall. Looking at Swallow, one of the most southerly wintering species, rainfall also has a positive effect on its populations.



Willow Tit (left) suffered a catastrophic decline in numbers of 82 per cent between 1995 and 2012, as shown in the graph (above).

Little Egret is a success story, expanding in both numbers and range since it was first recorded breeding in 1996. Currently Amber listed, it could move to the Green List this year.



For other species, such as Yellow Wagtail, there was no relationship between population change and rainfall. This may be because environmental issues here in the UK override any effects of factors overseas. It is important that we understand threats to bird populations throughout their annual cycle to help devise better measures to conserve them.

Influencing the Red List

On the UK Lists of Birds of Conservation Concern, the Red category represents the highest conservation priority, Amber the next most critical group and Green the species and subspecies of least concern. When it comes to allotting species to the appropriate grading, BBS population trends play an important role. The categorisation is revised periodically and the latest update is due to be published this autumn. The news of an updated list leads to speculation about which species are coming off or going onto the Red List and which are moving between Amber and Green.

Whinchat is currently on the Amber List, but for how long? The BBS provides the longest available UK population trend for this species and the latest report shows a decline of 55 per cent. A decline of 50 per cent or more is one of the Red List criteria. Another Amber species, Pied Flycatcher, has declined by 53 per cent on BBS data from 1995 to 2012. Could this species move to the Red List?

On a more positive note, Little Egret has increased exponentially and hugely expanded its UK breeding range since it was first discovered breeding in Dorset in 1996. The latest BBS report shows this increase to be a massive 1,666 per cent. Will this take the species from Amber to the Green List?

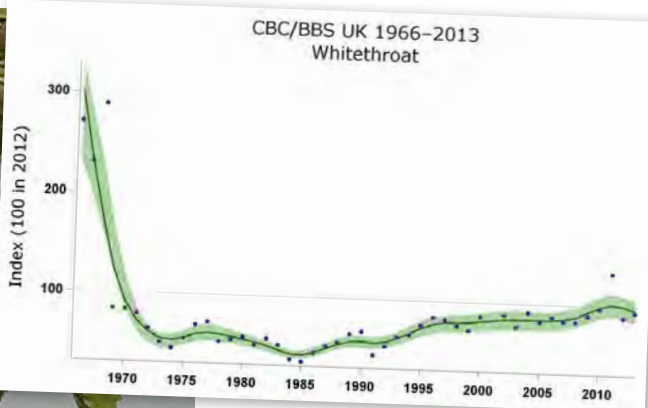
Changes for Common Whitethroat, currently Amber, have been complex. The population famously crashed by an estimated 70 per cent between the 1968 and 1969 breeding seasons, due to a drought in the western Sahel region of Africa, and fell further to an all-time low in the early 1980s. The population has not fully recovered, but is a 35 per cent increase between 1995 and 2012 enough to see the species moved back onto the Green List?

Predicting the future

What does the future hold for our breeding birds? Much cannot be known, but one relatively tractable issue is the likely effect of the predicted climatic warming in the UK. A study on bird



Numbers of Common Whitethroat (left) are slowly recovering from an all-time low in the '80s (see graph above). However, it is currently an Amber-listed species.



abundance and distribution using data from the BBS in relation to climate change projected an increase in Nuthatch and Green Woodpecker and a decline in Eurasian Curlew and Meadow Pipit.

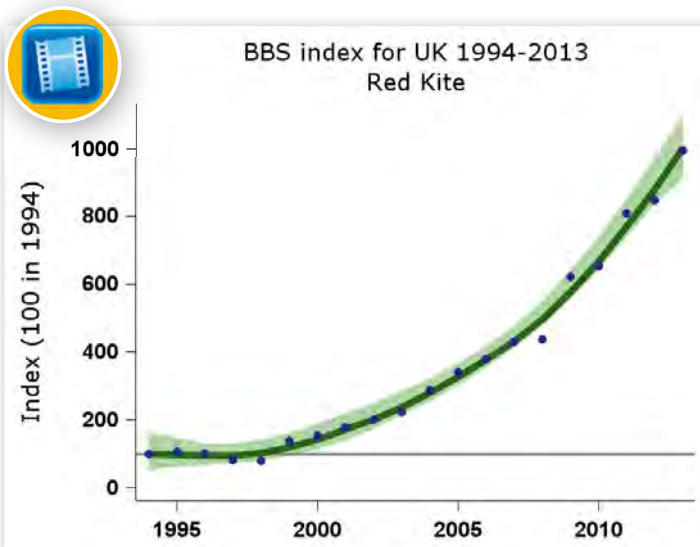
High numbers of Nuthatch are found where average summer temperatures are above 20°C, so warming is likely to make new areas of the UK suitable. This research suggested an increase of 67 per cent from a 1997 baseline to 2050. Eurasian Curlew numbers were predicted to fall by 35 per cent over the same period with, among other things, increasing temperatures and summer drought contributing to the decline. Green Woodpeckers were predicted to increase by 300 per cent in the UK and Meadow Pipits to decline by 19 per cent.

Long-term projections like these could assist future conservation efforts in the UK, especially for species such as Eurasian Curlew, where a significant proportion of the global population is in the UK (see last month's issue, pages 55-58). Climate-change models suggest that northerly distributed bird species are likely to become an increasingly high conservation priority in the UK.

Only through continued monitoring by the BBS can we ensure there are data to guide us when devising conservation measures and show where future research should be focused. Why not be part of this long-term survey? ■



Based on research using BBS data, Nuthatch could benefit from climate change in the UK, with a predicted increase in numbers of 67 per cent.



Red Kite represents a huge victory for conservation, having been successfully reintroduced to England and Scotland. According to BBS data, numbers are still increasing.

MORE ABOUT THE BBS AND HOW TO TAKE PART

- Find out more about the survey at www.bto.org/bbs.
- You will need to know common birds by sight and sound.
- Upland and remote squares are currently under-represented and particularly valuable to the survey.
- Email bbs@bto.org to make contact with your Regional Organiser and discuss the nearest available BBS squares.
- Make three visits between April and June, one to record habitat, the other two to survey the birds.
- Walk two transects through your allocated 1-km BBS square, recording the birds seen or heard.
- Enter the data online or send in your survey paperwork.
- Repeat the following year – consistency is key.

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Expenses claim



Seabird colonies provide some of the most spectacular and awe-inspiring opportunities for watching wildlife in Britain, but **Adrian Brockless** asks if the costs of visiting these islands are prohibitive and if they are in danger of putting off the next generation of wildlife enthusiasts.

S seabird colonies are awe-inspiring places. Seldom does one encounter wildlife on such a spectacular scale as when one visits, say, Skomer Island off the south-west coast of Wales or the Farne Islands off the Northumberland coast. For the more intrepid, Shetland offers the ultimate in seabird encounters.

These colonies should be visited for their own sake; they are good for the soul. Each year I travel to one of the many that Britain boasts for my annual 'fix', and I am not the only one. But they also have the capacity to fire an interest in the natural world in ways that will instil a greater awareness of their importance in future generations. I understand this from personal experience from working as a species protection warden at a mainland colony of Little Terns on the Northumberland coast – people who had no real interest in birds would come to the tern site as part of a day out. Without exception they would leave genuinely enthralled by their experiences; frequently I would see them again.

Britain has many seabird islands, but a large number of these are in remote locations and often inaccessible. Shetland, for example, arguably houses the best of the country's seabird colonies, but is costly to get to and requires a stay for a significant period of time to enjoy the best of what's on offer. A boat trip around the islands of Noss and Bressay – two of the many seabird jewels in Shetland's crown – will cost you about £45; a boat trip around Hermaness and Muckle Flugga costs from around £150. These are, however, specialist trips designed for more dedicated birders; for the casual observer, these trips will be of little interest.

Access all areas

There are more accessible islands that also provide high-octane seabird experiences; these have the potential to fire an interest in natural history in young and old alike. Two of the most reachable are the Farne Islands off the coast of Northumberland and Skomer off the south-west coast of Wales. Between April and September, boat trips run daily and provide an

opportunity for those holidaying in the area to see some of the world's greatest wildlife spectacles. I shall take the costs of travelling to these colonies as my examples, since they represent two of the most tourist friendly and so are the most likely to capture the imaginations of those who might otherwise show little interest in wildlife.

The Farne Islands and Skomer are well managed by teams of wardens working for the National Trust and The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales respectively. Costs need to be covered for the accommodation of the wardens and the extensive maintenance that such sites require if they are to host large numbers of visitors. These expenses are to a large extent recovered through landing fees. Landing on Inner Farne costs £6.80 unless you are a National Trust member; it costs £10 to land on Skomer (these are figures for adults; concessions are less). On the whole I would say these fees are reasonable. What is arguably less reasonable is the price of getting to and from the colonies.

A return trip to Skomer (10 minutes each way) costs £11 with no concessions

Puffins are popular birds even with non-birders, and visiting a breeding colony like this one on the Farne Islands could trigger a life-long interest in wildlife.



JASON WARD

“The sheer awe-inspiring beauty of the spectacle means that everyone should have the opportunity to visit seabird colonies”

The cost of getting to seabird colonies like the Farne Islands and Skomer soon adds up – is the expense putting people off?

except for those under 16, in which case it is £7. For a family of four who are not members of The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales, landing fees plus the boat fare amounts to quite an expense: £56 in fact.

While the boat to Skomer is merely a shuttle service, the Farne Islands landing trips also provide a circumnavigation of the islands. A 2.5-hour cruise to Inner Farne including an hour or so on the island itself generally includes a trip around all of the islands with knowledgeable commentary in

addition to landing, and costs about £15. Add the landing fee to this (assuming non-membership of the National Trust) and it costs your average adult about £21.80 (for a child this is generally about £10 for the boat trip and £3.50 for the landing fee). So the total cost to a family of four would be around £70.60.

Such expense is simply unaffordable for many. This is a real shame because it potentially excludes many people from encountering wildlife in ways which might fire a life-long enthusiasm. This isn't just important from an individual

point of view – the welfare of the environment is, in many cases, catered for by those with that interest.

Operating costs

There are substantial costs associated with running boat trips: fuel, maintenance, crew salaries, insurance and mooring charges all add up. These trips usually only run during the spring and summer months; where companies run year-round boat trips, visitor numbers are substantially lower than in summer. Moreover, even during peak times, days are lost to poor weather. It must also be remembered that the companies that run these services are businesses and need to make a profit.

However, none of this detracts from the fact that the costs of travelling to and from even the most accessible seabird islands are prohibitive. Visiting a seabird colony is a privilege, but it should not be a luxury that only the reasonably well-off can enjoy. The sheer awe-inspiring beauty of the spectacle means that everyone should have the opportunity to visit seabird colonies irrespective of income.

Those who construct their businesses around these colonies should remember that the natural world is more than a commodity – it is something amazing that has the potential to instil a sense of wonder in young and old alike, as well as a public awareness of its importance in future generations. All such companies should be mindful of this when considering the kinds of charges to impose on the public. ■

Being 'dive-bombed' by Arctic Terns on Inner Farne is a memorable experience, and one that everyone should enjoy.

JAMES HANLON

DREW BUCKLEY (WWW.DREWBUCKLEYPHOTOGRAPHY.COM)

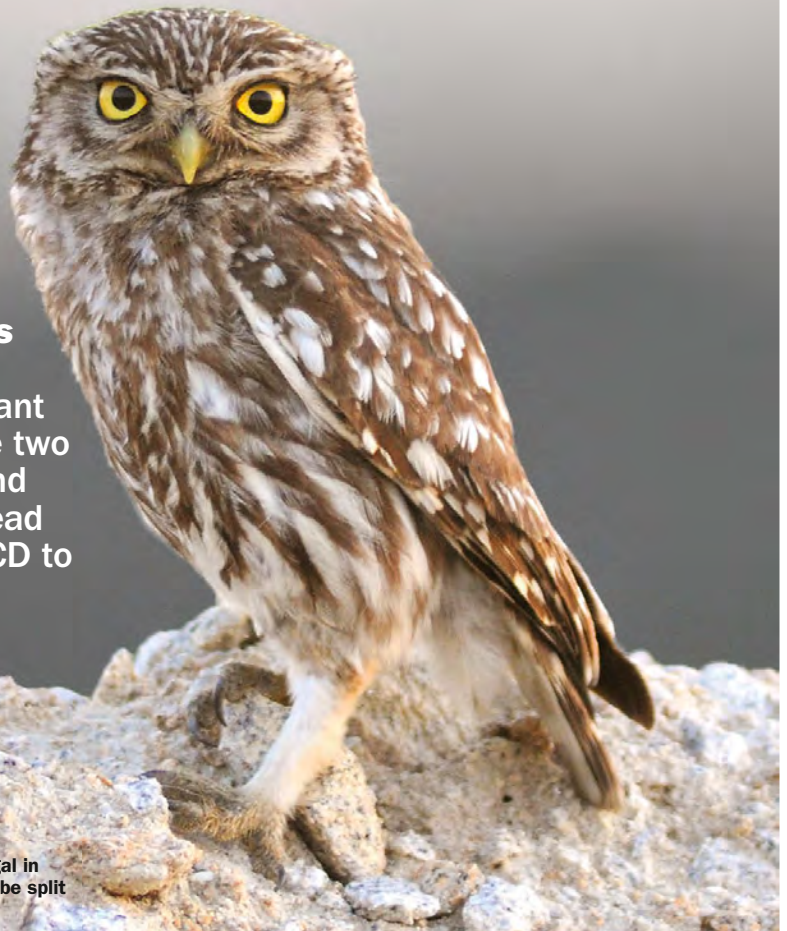
Cucu what?



In this abridged chapter from their new book *Undiscovered Owls*, **Magnus Robb** and The Sound

Approach describe the most important little owl calls, explain why there are two species in the Western Palearctic and show how to hear the difference. Read while listening to this month's free CD to get the full picture.

This *vidalii* Little Owl was photographed and recorded in Portugal in June 2010. Differences in calls and genetics suggest it should be split from the subspecies *noctua*, or 'Cucumiau'.



RENÉ POP PORTUGAL (WWW.SOUNDAPPROACH.CO.UK)

It was not until I lived in Portugal that I became intimate with little owls of the genus *Athene*. I could recognise their voices easily enough, but they always seemed to be inventing new sounds. Once I was able to sort their calls into types, I was thrilled to find that I could distinguish by ear two different little owl forms, both living in the Western Palearctic.

The big surprise was that of the many possible taxa, it was *vidalii* that was the odd one out. This is not an owl I need to sit five hours on a plane to see, but one I have lived with in Britain (where it was introduced in 1842), the Netherlands and Portugal. A new genetic study (Pellegrino *et al* 2014) recently confirmed a large genetic difference between this and the other European little owls, and clarified their distribution. Since *A. vidalii* is the best-known taxon in the English-speaking world, the familiar name Little Owl seems appropriate for it. All the others share a diagnostic battle cry, which several Mediterranean languages use to identify them. I will do the same, and group them together as Cucumiau *A. noctua*.

Volatile calls ...

Athene owl calls are highly volatile. Each one seems capable of morphing into others of higher and lower emotional intensity. In the following account, the progression is from relative calm through increasing excitement to decisive action. The notes become shorter with each successive call type as they become more and more explosive.

Hearing a male Little Owl hooting its long, rising notes on a warm, windy night in late February (track 1), you would never suspect its fiery temper. By the light of a gibbous moon, it calmly surveys its small patch of Holm Oak, or *montado*. The nearest inhabited building is more than a mile away, so for once there are no barking dogs. Only a croaking Natterjack Toad and some rustling leaves put the owl in its living context.

In early spring, males hoot day and night, with a strong peak at dusk and a lesser one at dawn. A bout of hooting may last several minutes or longer. As it progresses, the overall pitch and volume gradually rise. When the male reaches the highest pitch at which he can hoot loudly, the calls gradually level out. Females can

also hoot, but only in a short series of up to about five lower-pitched, shorter sounds (Exo 1984). In track 2, both members of a pair are hooting, the much quieter one being the female. She only starts in earnest at 0:14 and then her series consists of just three short hoots.

The Little Owls that I know best breed around Rosmaninhal in eastern Portugal. The village is full of owls, but recording them involves negotiating an acoustic minefield. When one dog gets a fright, it might be 10 minutes before the wave of unrest has made it around the village.

In early March, a 500 m walk along the northern fringe of the village could take you through around six Little Owl territories. In the orange glow of the streetlights, these not-so-sharp-sighted owls are able to stay active all night long. I recorded track 3 underneath a lamppost where one male liked to hoot. It shows how Little Owl calls 'grade' into one another. Here, hooting emerges from two much quieter call types.

At the other extreme, hooting often leads into higher-pitched 'excitement calls' (Exo and Scherzinger 1989). Their contour is highly variable but



The Little Owl found in Britain is *vidalii*. Not native to the country, the species was introduced in the 19th century.

CUCUMIAU VARIATIONS

IN the following set of recordings, Arnoud takes us clockwise around the Mediterranean, via subspecies *noctua* in Bulgaria and *lilith* in southern Turkey, ending with *glauca* and *saharae* in Morocco. There is a gradual change from rising to falling pitch in the hoots.

Track 14: we are in a small town in southern Bulgaria. The recording starts with rising hoots. At 0:36 the male changes perch, causing one hoot to be modulated by its wingbeats. From then on, he hoots more intensely and the contour of each hoot levels out.

Track 15: we are in south-eastern Turkey, listening to subspecies *lilith*. During the stillness just before a desert storm, a male hoots into a great emptiness of rolling, herb-carpeted hills. As the tension builds, each hoot's inflection gradually changes from rising to slightly falling. Although not unheard of in Little Owl, this is certainly more common in Cucumiau, especially east and south of the Mediterranean.

Track 16: we are in a small fortified market town in southern Morocco, situated in the broad valley between the High Atlas and the Anti-Atlas mountain ranges. A male *glauca* hoots from a pole sticking out of a roof, close to the old city wall. His hoots are strongly descending, except for a lower one about halfway through the series. Arnoud made several recordings of this male and in all of them, descending hoots were the rule.

Track 17: we have moved about 55 miles south-west to Oued Massa on the Atlantic coast. It is mid-morning, and a male *saharae* is hooting from a lone tree in sandy agricultural land between rocky desert and a brackish river. Although the first hoot is rising, most of those that follow are descending, at least in their overall contour. ■

always rises before it falls. A series may be fairly long, but excitement calls are by nature unstable. Often they escalate into aggressive song, alarm calls or cackling, depending on the course of the interaction. Alternatively, things may calm down until all we hear is subdued hooting.

In track 4 it is 2.40 am. Except for one or two insomniacs, the dogs are asleep, but goat bells are still tinkling. The Little Owls are wide awake and socialising. At least six different individuals give excitement calls at high intensity. Over the course of five minutes a 'Mexican wave' of these excitement calls passed slowly from right to left as each pair tested its neighbours.

... and aggressive song

Aggressive song, the best-known sound in Little Owl's large repertoire, consists of a burst of particularly shrill excitement calls: *miau ... miau ... miau ...* and so on. Because so much energy is required to produce such an outburst, it never lasts very long. Often, both pair members participate as a duet, triggering their neighbours as well. In track 5, at least four birds are performing aggressive song, with others also calling in the background.

After a couple of beckoning calls, the pair in track 6 perform a shrill aggressive song as a duet. This gives way to a long series of more tempered excitement calls.

Aggressive song is used throughout the year and plays a prominent role in autumn, when young birds are dispersing and competing with adults for territories. When I record nocturnal migration in October and November, I often hear it during calm nights. There are peaks at dawn and dusk, especially in areas of high population density. Track 7 was recorded in autumn at a disused monastery perched high above the sea, about 75 minutes before sunrise.

Sometimes when discovering and chasing off intruders, aggressive song escalates into the alarm call (Exo and Scherzinger 1989). In Little Owl this usually consists of at least two notes. The complete call may be given in isolation or repeated several times. The alarm may also be used to warn family members about potential predators. If young are begging nearby, they immediately fall silent.

The two-note alarm calls in track 8 were given by an adult accompanying

fledged juveniles, when it became nervous about my presence. Track 9 illustrates the less common single-note alarm call, given by a surprised owl as it flew round the corner of the cliff-top monastery.

Cackling is Little Owl's most explosive call. It conveys extreme excitement in a variety of situations that include disturbances near the nest, encounters with enemies (I once heard it when a Barn Owl suddenly appeared), territorial disputes and squabbles with partners. In track 10, the caller arrives from the left and completes the series from a perch. Cackling is in some ways an escalation of the alarm call and structurally related to it. Unlike the latter, which contains a warning, cackling usually accompanies decisive action. Of all Little Owl sounds, this is the one most often given in flight. It may ring out quite unexpectedly or mark the end of a longer interaction. We can hear it at any time of year.

Track 11 shows Little Owl social dynamics at their most fluid. All of the loud call types that we have covered so far are included, except for cackling. The recording can serve as a test: for you to see whether you can pick them all out, and for



Little Owl has a bewildering array of calls, which differ markedly from those of Cucumiau.

DICK FORSMAN, SPAIN (WWW.SOUNDAPPROACH.CO.UK)

me to find out whether I have described them adequately.

Sounds of the south

In 1981, fast-flowing streams of lava poured down the north-western flank of Mount Etna on Sicily. The lava solidified into a jagged no man's land, then slowly greened as a variety of plants found pockets of fertile soil. Sicilian Rock Partridges found this habitat very much to their liking, and that was why Arnoud

and René spent the night there in April 2007. Some orchards narrowly missed by the lava contained many Eurasian Scops Owls. Nearby, cavities in the lava offered perfect nesting opportunities for Cucumiaus. In track 12, you can hear several males hooting at once. A few years later I visited the same area in late March. The male in track 13 hooted non-stop for hours.

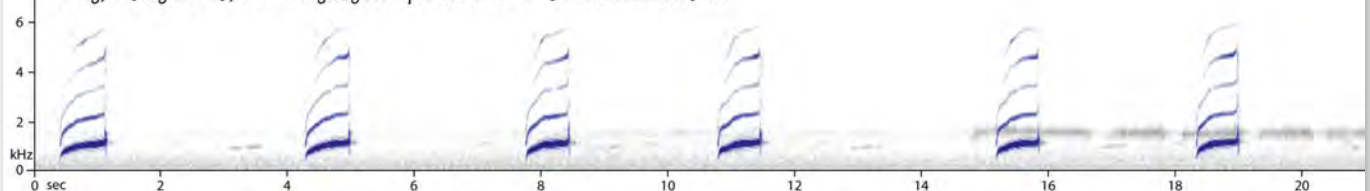
While some sounds of Cucumiau are very distinctive, its hooting is similar to

that of Little Owl. In southern Italy I could hear no difference from the Little Owls of northern Europe. However, Cucumiau has several populations, and subtle differences started to emerge as I listened to recordings of some of the others. See the box 'Cucumiau calls explained' on page 63 for a description of some of these calls.

One of the people who helped me most during my travels in Italy had better remain nameless. It was during secret

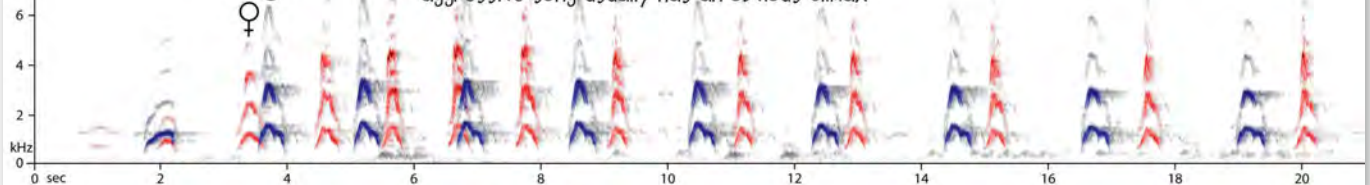
Track 1: Little Owl *Athene vidalii*

long, rising hoots, becoming higher-pitched over several minutes ...



Track 6: Little Owl *Athene vidalii*

aggressive song usually has an obvious climax





The pale Middle Eastern form of Cucumiau, *lilith*.

HAKAN DELIN (WWW.SOUNDAPPROACH.CO.UK)

outdoor trysts that he discovered some of the best places for me to sound-record Cucumiaus. A very quiet lane with a ruined farm building and a small copse proved perfect for both activities. Based on our anonymous benefactor's suggestion, my friends and I went there several times to make recordings.

If nothing happened for too long, Andrea Corso would encourage the owls with some excellent imitations. Their first reaction was usually hooting, but this

would often progress towards excitement calls. When these escalated into aggressive song, they began to sound very different from Little Owl.

As Cucumiau's name suggests, every loud *miau* of the aggressive song is preceded by one or two low, chugging sounds: *cucuMLAU*, *cucuMLAU*, *cucuMLAU*. By contrast, Little Owl has an aggressive song composed of just a single type of sound: *miau*, *miau*, *miau*. It was while listening to the 'lover's lane' pair (track 18)

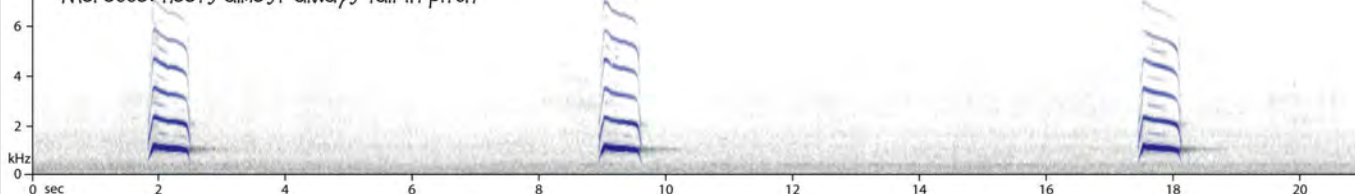
that I first noticed the difference.

At first I thought I had discovered something unique to Italian little owls. Later, when I checked recordings of other taxa, I learned that *vidalii* is the only Western Palearctic *Athene* owl that lacks chugging notes in its aggressive song. Since aggressive song is arguably the most important long-distance signal in their repertoire, this striking difference seems to me to be highly significant.

Aggressive song follows broadly

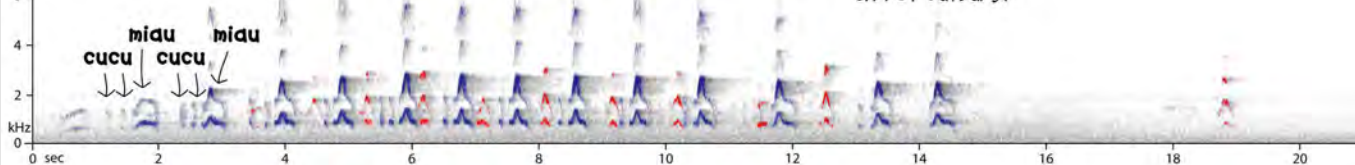
Track 16: Cucumiau *Athene noctua glaux*

Morocco: hoots almost always fall in pitch



Track 18: Cucumiau *Athene noctua*

♀ fainter, but also gives *cucu* notes towards end of outburst





the same pattern in all subspecies of Cucumiau. Tracks 19, 20 and 21 provide examples of subspecies *lilith*, *glauca* and *saharae*. Note that in all three there are also some strongly descending excitement calls. As with hooting, this descending contour seems to become steeper as we go clockwise around the Mediterranean.

Other differences

These taxa – *glauca*, *lilith*, *noctua* and *saharae* – are quite diverse in their appearance,

not just in coloration but even to some degree in structure (Cramp 1985). It may seem surprising that *vidalii*, which looks rather similar to *noctua*, is the odd one out, but the genetic evidence is compelling. Pellegrino *et al* (2014) found a very big difference between a north-western group (my ‘Little Owl’) and a south-eastern group (my ‘Cucumiau’). They described this as “towards the upper end of the range” for genetic distances between sibling species.

There can be little argument about splitting the little owls in two, and the more pertinent question is whether there should be further splits. The vocal evidence for this is subtle, but the various Cucumiau subspecies do seem to show slight differences in both hooting and excitement calls. Although I am convinced that these differences are real, the ones I hear between Little and Cucumiau aggressive song are much clearer. So what does the genetic evidence say about subdivisions within Cucumiau?

Pellegrino *et al* (2014) used an amazing 326 samples from across Europe. One of their most important findings was that the long-neglected subspecies *sarda* from Sardinia (presumably including the few little owls that live on Corsica) forms the oldest-known branch within the south-eastern group. It has been evolving separately from other Cucumiaus for around half a million years. We were caught out by this, but Davide De Rosa kindly supplied me with some recordings by a friend. The calls in track 22 seem pretty eccentric, and I am not even sure whether to call them hooting or excitement calls. Other recordings he sent establish that *sarda* has aggressive song like that of its closest relatives in Italy. Davide told me that its Sardinian name is in fact ‘Cucumiau’!

Within southern Europe, there are two other well-defined subgroups. One of them is confined to southern Italy and Sicily, although its genes do

Above: Cucumiau has a much more extensive breeding range than Little Owl (see map right). There are several subspecies, and further ‘splitting’ is conceivable.

Right: the map indicates the approximate breeding distribution of Little Owl *Athene vidalii* and Cucumiau *A. noctua*. Recording locations are marked by red dots.



occasionally crop up further north. The other is distributed from the Maritime Alps of France, through the northern half of Italy to at least the Balkans and Cyprus. It probably goes much further east, but Pellegrino *et al* (2014) only studied the situation in Europe. Since the type specimen of *noctua* came from Krain in modern-day Slovenia, we are obliged to use this name for the northern Italian-Balkan group. This renders another, later established subspecies name obsolete. Owls from Greece, the taxonomic home of '*indigena*', are genetically and vocally indistinguishable from those of northern Italy. On these grounds at least, *indigena* might become a synonym of *noctua*.

Pellegrino *et al* (2014) probably did not set out to split species or change names, but their work has two further implications for taxonomy. One is that the population from southern Italy and Sicily, which I always assumed to belong to *noctua*, lacks a scientific name. The other is that birds from Cyprus, traditionally included in *lilith*, are indistinguishable from the northern Italian-Balkan group that we are now calling *noctua*. It remains to be seen whether *lilith* from other parts of the range are genetically distinct, but an older study suggests they are possibly not.

Beyond Europe, we only have Wink (2008) to go on. He studied just 11 individuals, but included specimens of '*indigena*' from Greece, *lilith* from Cyprus, Israel and Turkey, *glauca* from Israel and *plumipes* from Mongolia. He found almost no genetic difference between '*indigena*' and *lilith*, and that *glauca* was a very close relative of both.

Undiscovered Owls only covers the Western Palearctic, but the range of 'little owl' stretches all the way to the Pacific. It remains to be discovered whether several Asian taxa should be included in Little Owl or Cucumia, or gain recognition as species in their own right. ■

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10x42	£405	£339

HAWKE PREMIER Open Hinge Compacts

Green or Black

Model	RRP	NOW
8x25	£49.95	£44.99
10x25	£54.95	£49.99
12x25	£59.95	£54.99

HAWKE PREMIER Lightweight, Roof Prism Binos

Model	RRP	NOW
8x42 - Black	£64.95	£59.99
8x42 - Green	£64.95	£59.99
8x42 - Camo	£64.95	£59.99
10x42 - Black	£69.95	£64.99
10x42 - Green	£69.95	£64.99
10x42 - Camo	£69.95	£64.99

HAWKE NatureTrek Series

Model	RRP	NOW
8x32	£99.95	£89.99
10x32	£109.95	£99.99
8x42	£119.95	£104.99
10x42	£129.95	£109.99
10x50	£134.95	£116.99
12x50	£139.95	£121.99

HAWKE Sapphire ED
Open Hinge Binoculars with dielectric prism coatings

Green or Black

Model	RRP	NOW
8x43	£429.95	£389
10x43	£439.95	£399

opticon Traveller BGA Mg
Pocket Binoculars

Model	RRP	NOW
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8x32 BGA MG	£279	£229
10x32 BGA MG	£299	£239

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8x42	£360	£299
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Opticon Universal Mount	£55	£55
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Swarovski Tree Fixing Screw	£45	£45
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DCB-5 Digital Camera Base Inc. Balance Rail	£275	£275
DCB II Swing Adapter	£278	£278
TIS 800 Telephoto Lens Adapter	£435	£435

SCOPE ACCESSORIES

Model	RRP	NOW
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Country Strider GTX	RRP £130	£89
Countrymaster II GTX	RRP £130	£89

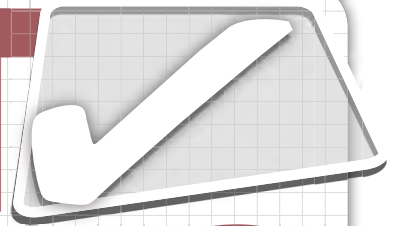
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EXPERT REVIEWS



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Heavyweight contender

Mike Alibone discovers Viking's new 'field-flattening' binoculars are a serious contender in the budget range, readily comparable to higher-priced models.

REVIEW

Viking 8x42 ED-FF binocular

THE advances made in improving image quality in high-end optics are continuing to permeate the middle and lower levels of the market, resulting in many more affordable, high-performance models now widely available to birders. With 8x42 and 10x42 models, Viking's new ED-FF range falls squarely into this category. Launched at Birdfair in 2014, they have generated considerable interest with subsequent healthy sales. This is unsurprising, as I discovered when I put the 8x42 model through its paces.

'Solid' would be a very apt description for this binocular, and it was the word which immediately sprang to mind on removing the product from its carry case when it first arrived. This is no lightweight in any sense: its 850 g weight and rather generous rubber body armour combine to lend an almost 'chunky' feel, although it is still averagely sized.

The textured, non-slip rubber covering is uniform throughout the length of the body and is thoughtfully contoured to facilitate a comfortable holding position. This comfort also extends to the focus wheel, which is ergonomically positioned in line with the forefinger to allow relaxed

operation without stretching while the middle two fingers rest securely on the bridge.

The rubber-covered eyecups are narrow rimmed. They twist out, click-locking positively in two positions above the base setting, to give a maximum 22 mm of eye relief at which the whole field of view is still visible.

There is a non-locking single-eye focus adjustment ring built into the right ocular directly below the eyecup, which does not have to be raised in order to operate it. It turns smoothly and, although it offers little resistance to



72 May's photo challenge

This month Steve Young wants to see your photos that simply say 'spring is here'!

73 Small and beautiful

Steve Young puts to the test Nikon's new 300 mm prime lens and 1.4x teleconverter.

75 Bird sounds

A book based on the popular Radio 4 series *Tweet of the Day* offers insight into an eclectic list of birds.

75 Greece's birds fully covered

Two new site guides look at northern Greece and the wider Eastern Rhodopes area.

76 Alien invaders

This field guide will help you separate invasive and introduced species from those native to Britain.

76 North-east birds

The latest bird report for Northumberland covers in depth all species recorded in 2013.

THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.



STEVE YOUNG is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



MIKE ALIBONE is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



ALAN TILMOUTH is a Northumberland-based birder who has had a passion for wildlife since childhood.



DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining *Birdwatch*, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



ROB HUME began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books.

? Did you know?

'**FIELD** flatteners' are correcting lenses that can be added to the eyepieces or objectives to balance transmitted light rays which do not come to a sharp focus in the same plane. The addition of these lenses improves edge-to-edge sharpness and lowers the curvature of field distortion at the periphery of the image.

movement, it remained at my chosen setting throughout the review period.

Focusing is achieved via a ribbed alloy central wheel, about one-and-a-half finger's width; it turns freely and operates well even with thickly gloved hands. According to the manufacturer's specification, almost one-and-a-half anti-clockwise rotations takes the focused image from 2.5 m to infinity. In reality I was pleasantly surprised to find I could focus clearly on objects down to just 1.5-m range.

If I was suitably impressed with the handling and ease of use of the ED-FF, I was even more pleased with the image it delivers. It is crisp, sharp, bright and to my eyes takes on an almost three-dimensional effect that is particularly evident when viewing passerines which are moving within the tree canopy.

The combination of premium ED glass with field-flattening lenses located between the eyepiece glass and prisms no doubt contributes to the overall image quality, as well as virtually eliminating distortion at the edges of a very wide field of view. The colour rendition is close to neutral, but there is a hint of cold, bluish tones; the level of contrast is relatively high. Bright, natural colours go some way to counteract the low levels of chromatic aberration in the image, which passes the simple

'Coot on bright water' test for colour fringe detection.

This binocular also performs well in low light conditions – another significant point in its favour. It's also worth mentioning that the lenses are treated with an oil-phobic coating to give additional protection against the elements by repelling water and dirt.

The ED-FF is a high-performance binocular designed to compete with models from the ranges of the top-tier manufacturers, and is pitched at a highly attractive price point. It comes complete with a soft carry case, protective cloth pouch, articulated rainguard and stay-on objective lens caps and, at just £399, represents a very attractive package indeed. ■

Further info

- **Price:** £399
- **Size:** 155x129 mm
- **Weight:** 850 g
- **Magnification:** 8x
- **Field of view:** 142 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** not available
- **Close focus:** 2.5 m
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** 10 years

Verdict

- ✓ Virtually no distortion at edges of field of view
- ✓ Image is bright with natural colours
- ✗ Somewhat heavy, though this contributes to its solid feel



STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

Spring



Above: just before mating, Mute Swans perform an elaborate display, swimming around each other, head bobbing, bill touching and then this heart-shape finale.

Below: lakes at a local park will host Mallards, Coots and other common species. A little time spent there may produce a rewarding shot, like this yellow-coloured Mallard duckling among an otherwise normal brood of 12.



A few months ago I set a winter challenge asking for a photo of any bird species that just said 'winter', and there were plenty of good entries. The preceding autumn challenge was also very popular. So now that spring is here – you guessed it! – it's time for a spring photo challenge.

I want to see any photo of any species that simply says 'spring is here' when I look at it. It could be a courtship display, birds collecting nest material, a singing bird, a garden bird perched in the middle of a bush full of blossom or just those Mallards on the local park getting frisky; but please, no shots of any species on the nest.

I'm expecting lots of entries, so whatever you take make sure exposure and focusing are spot on to have a chance of winning this month's prize, a copy of *Remarkable Birds* by Dominic Couzens. Send your best candidates to editorial@birdwatch.co.uk by 27 May – good luck!

• Turn to page 73 to find out who won March's challenge, Goldfinch.

Nikon's prime factor

REVIEW

Nikon Nikkor 300 mm f4E PF ED VR AF-S lens and TC-14E III teleconverter

OVER the last few years, 300 mm f4 prime lenses seem to have gone out of fashion with many photographers, who now prefer to use zoom lenses that cover that focal length within their range. With this updated model, however, Nikon has set new standards with a lens that is so small and compact that I almost thought I'd been sent the wrong one.

At just 15 cm long and 775 g in weight, this lens will fit in a large pocket and virtually any camera bag. It is so lightweight that I didn't even think of using it on a tripod, and the vibration reduction (VR) and auto-focus (AF) are extremely quiet and fast. How has this reduction in size and weight been achieved?

A totally new optical design has been used, and this is the first Nikon lens to be equipped with a phase fresnel (the PF in the title) element. This brings size and weight benefits, as Nikon explains: "Use of a phase fresnel (PF) lens element noticeably reduces the weight, without degrading image quality; nano crystal coat effectively reduces ghost and flare, increasing the clarity and contrast of images, while an ED (extra-low dispersion) glass element minimises chromatic aberration."

The new vibration reduction (VR) system claims to give the equivalent of 4.5 stops of 'steadiness' when hand-holding, so if normal hand-holding to keep a lens steady is 1/2,000th sec, this VR means a shutter speed of around 1/100th sec can be used while still achieving a sharp image. This won't necessarily be the case with birds as they tend to move, so 1/100th sec won't give a sharp image of a flying bird, as the wings will be blurred.

So, that's the upgrade to the lens, but does it work and give the results that we all want when out in the field? I have to say it does and it was a joy to use. The image quality was quite superb, with sharpness, contrast and

colours all excellent. The VR works superbly, and when I was shooting at 1/125th sec I achieved 90 per cent success rate on my full-frame D810 body. There is a Sport VR setting for panning with fast-moving subjects plus a normal setting for more static ones; I tended to leave it on the Sport setting.

This lens really came into its own on flight shots. It was so easy to follow and shoot as a bird flew past – at a seabird colony or on a pelagic this would be an ideal lens. It also has a close focus of 1.4 m, so could be very useful for butterflies and dragonflies.

I also had the new 1.4x converter, the TC-14E III, to test, and this was a perfect lens to try it on. The 300 mm f4 was converted to a 420 mm f5.6 and it still performed superbly. The AF slowed down slightly at this aperture, but it was still very good, and the sharpness seemed unaffected by the addition of the converter. It also worked very well on my 500 mm lens. This 1.4x replaces the current model and is a slightly smaller version with fluorine coating to improve optical performance.

The lens is supplied with a lens hood and case but – and this is my only criticism – not with a tripod collar. If you want to use a tripod you either have to fit it using the camera body's tripod screw thread or buy the RT-1 tripod collar as an extra (£149). For everyday use I imagine most people will not use the lens on a tripod, but there will be times when you might want to – for a slow shutter speed shot, for example.

But apart from that one gripe, this is a beautiful lens. After reviewing the 80-400 mm zoom lens some time ago I went out and bought one, thinking it would cover all eventualities not dealt with by my 500 mm. It still does, but now that this 300 mm has appeared I may well have a re-think, as the light weight, quality and ease of use are very, very tempting. **Steve Young**



PHOTOS: STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Top: the local long-staying Long-tailed Duck was a bit distant on my visit. This shot has been cropped 50-60 per cent, but is still very sharp. **D810, 300 mm f4, ISO 800, 1-4,000th sec, f6.3.**

Above: this Common Chiffchaff was in my garden, while the lens with converter attached were to hand. The image has been cropped by about 30 per cent and is pin sharp. **D810, 300 mm f4 with 1.4x converter, hand-held, ISO 800, 1-5,000th sec, f5.6.**

More info

Nikkor 300 mm f4E PF ED VR AF-S lens
Price: £1,639 • Focal length: 300 mm • Diameter: 89 mm • Length: 147.5 mm • Weight: 755 g • Close focus: 1.4 m

More info

TC-14E III teleconverter
Price: £459 • Diameter: 64 mm • Length: 24.5 mm • Weight: 190 g



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Helios precision optics have been distributed in the UK for nearly 50 years and offer an excellent combination of quality, performance and functionality, and represent exceptional value for money at their respective price levels

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Helios Fieldmaster ED spotting scopes are ideal for the serious birdwatcher and nature observer. They all feature exotic ED (Extra Low Dispersion) glass in their construction, which virtually eliminates chromatic aberration and delivers high-fidelity true colour images, and are fully waterproof and nitrogen filled for clear, fog-free viewing. All models are fully multi-coated throughout, feature an extendable dewshield/sun shade and supplied with stay-on case.

FIELDMASTER ED60DS

15-45x60ED

- Doublet Objective Lens
- 10:1 Ratio Dual-Speed Focuser
- Lightweight Polycarbonate Body

SRP £199

Model	Fieldmaster-ED60DS
Specification	15-45x60ED
Magnification	15x-45x
Object Lens Diameter	60mm
Field of View	2.8° - 1.3°
Actual Field of View	49m-23m@1000m
Eye Relief	20-18mm
Nearest Focus Distance	5m
Weight	1280g



Fieldmaster-ED60DS
Product Code 40908

ED OPTICS

FIELDMASTER ED80DS

20-60x80ED

- Triplet Objective Lens
- 10:1 Ratio Dual-Speed Focuser
- Lightweight Polycarbonate Body

SRP £399

Model	Fieldmaster-ED80DS
Specification	20-60x80ED
Magnification	20x-60x
Object Lens Diameter	80mm
Field of View	2.1° - 1°
Actual Field of View	37m-13m@1000m
Eye Relief	20-18mm
Nearest Focus Distance	4m
Weight	2450g



Fieldmaster-ED80DS
Product Code 40909

ED OPTICS

FIELDMASTER ED85DS

20-60x85ED

- Doublet Objective Lens
- 3.3:1 Ratio Dual-Speed Focuser
- Lightweight Magnesium Alloy Body
- Outstanding Optical Performance

SRP £599

Fieldmaster-ED85DS
Product Code 40911

ED OPTICS

Model	Fieldmaster-ED85DS Doublet
Specification	20-60x85ED
Magnification	20x-60x
Object Lens Diameter	85mm
Field of view	2.1° - 1.1°
Actual Field of View	36m-20m@1000m
Eye Relief	20-18mm
Nearest Focus Distance	6m
Weight	1982g



SRP £799

FIELDMASTER ED82DS 20-60x82ED

- Triplet Objective Lens
- 4:1 Ratio Dual-Speed Focuser
- Lightweight Magnesium Alloy Body
- Outstanding Optical Performance for the Demanding User

Fieldmaster-ED82DS
Product Code 40910

ED OPTICS

Model	Fieldmaster-ED82DS Triplet
Specification	20-60x82ED
Magnification	20x-60x
Object Lens Diameter	82mm
Field of view	2.1° - 1.05°
Actual Field of View	39m-20m@1000m
Eye Relief	19.5-18mm
Nearest Focus Distance	13m
Weight	1885g

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Twitter accounts



BBC Radio 4 listeners will know *Tweet of the Day*, a series of tiny offerings just before the popular *Today* programme. Each short broadcast begins with a vocalisation followed by the story of the bird that made it. This book is based on the rather quirky list of species presented (anything from Robin to Mourning Dove), but with much expanded text.

The book is divided up into the 12 months of the year, with around 18 or 20 birds per month. Each section has an introduction

from a birder's point of view and half a page to a page of text per bird, plus a liberal selection of bold and appealing illustrations by the excellent Carry Ackroyd, an ideal choice (especially the colour pictures) to complement the nice design, paper and 'feel' of the volume.

The texts are full of insight and elucidation and I find hardly any minute nits to pick, so why take the trouble? I might say that crossbills' beaks don't actually fit together like pliers, and wonder how many people really call redshank 'the warden of the marshes', but that's about all. It is perhaps a pity that it does not come with a CD, although almost 250 tracks would require several disks – perhaps a future release as an app or ebook could include sound files?

The authors wisely adapt the style and content to each bird, so there is no rigid structure and no need to cover the same themes for each – they just get straight



into whatever is interesting. It is a good and profitable read throughout and, while clearly

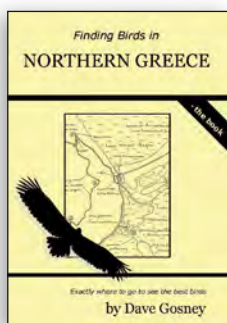
a great book to 'dip into', that underrates its appeal and authoritative content. **Rob Hume**

More info

- *Tweet of the Day: A Year of Britain's Birds* by Brett Westwood and Stephen Moss (Saltyard Books, London, 2015).
- 336 pages, 47 full-colour plates, numerous line drawings.
- ISBN 9781848549784. Pbk, £14.99.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£12.99

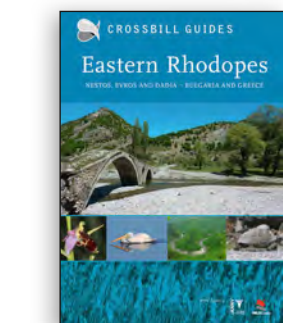
Greece is the word for birds



I'M old enough to remember being given sites for good birds abroad with a nod and 'Keep it under your hat'. Early guides were criticised for allowing all and sundry to invade favourite sites and disturb rare birds. When drafting the Birdwatcher's Code in the early Eighties, I added "Behave abroad as you do at home", knowing that the pressures of limited time and budget can lead to less than adequate care for the Code's first point: "The welfare of the bird always comes first."

That still applies, but the worry over secrecy has long gone, with guides mapping rare bird nests and giving an abundance of detail on exactly where to go. Better everyone knows than a secret site being destroyed.

Having not been to northern



Greece for a while, I'm pleasantly surprised that Dave Gosney's guide tells me that most sites remain and many are improved – despite the many problems, especially drainage on a vast scale, described more fully in the Crossbill Guide.

The two overlap a little, but Gosney's little paperback book covers the narrow belt of Greece from the magnificent Prespa lakes on the Albanian border to the remnant Evros Delta on the Turkish border; the glossy full-colour Crossbill Guide has a broader scope, including landscape, history and other wildlife, and extends much farther north to Bulgaria.

Site guides can just list certainties, underplaying the attractions of the lesser sites, or

offer a longer list of possibilities that can be grossly misleading. The Crossbill Guide has useful lists of expectations and good detail based on long walks and mountain hikes, while the Gosney book brings in detail from past visits – by Dave and others, mostly very recent – which read more like brief trip reports. Sometimes, Dave tells us what might be expected but that he failed to see – but after all, I often have a 'blank' day in my local New Forest. It adds a welcome sense of reality and manages expectations – you have to go and see for yourself!

This area of south-eastern Europe remains vitally important for birds and wonderful for any



naturalist and traveller with an eye for landscape, history and culture, and these guides are exceedingly helpful. To get a real flavour of the place, buy the Gosney DVD, too. **Rob Hume**

More info

- *Finding Birds in Northern Greece* by Dave Gosney (Easybirder, Sheffield, 2015).
- 44 pages, 23 black-and-white maps, line drawings.
- ISBN 9781907316487. Pbk, £7.50.

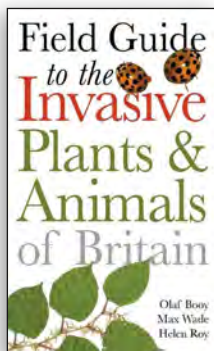
Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£6.49

More info

- *Eastern Rhodopes: Nestos, Evros and Dadia – Bulgaria and Greece* by Dirk Hilbers, Herman Dierickx, Alex Tabak and Albert Vliegthart (Crossbill Guides, Arnhem, The Netherlands, 2013).
- 256 pages, numerous colour photos, illustrations and maps.
- ISBN 9789491648014. Pbk, £19.95.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£16.95

Alien invasions North-east birds



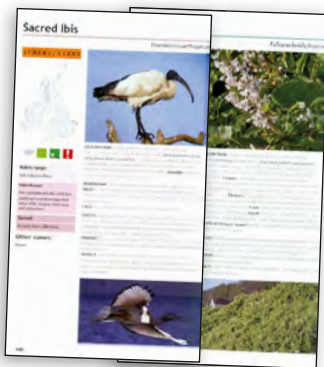
I wondered why a field guide would limit itself to 'aliens' (you need to separate them from natives, after all), and why 'invasive'?

Invasive is taken to mean organisms with a potential to spread and cause harm, so while we have the obvious – Grey Squirrel, Fallow Deer, Canada Goose, Ruddy Duck, Signal Crayfish, Himalayan Balsam and so on – we also have insects restricted even to a single house (so far). Harlequin Ladybird is in, because although it got here by itself, it came from an introduced population in Europe.

The book is a classic glossy colour photographic guide, looking

just as you might expect, with images, clear maps, identification tips (separating the aliens from the natives), notes on status, actual and potential threats and so on, and is very up to date and comprehensive. What do you know about Mediterranean Termite, Killer Shrimp or Southern Crestwort? Have you seen a Raccoon Dog or Crested Porcupine? What, exactly, was that parakeet?

The book is crammed with facts and shows how easily things can go badly wrong, although I'm hopeful that the Asian Super-ant stays put in its Gloucestershire flower pot. Recommended. **Rob Hume**



NORTHUMBERLAND is a big county with two bird clubs and several migrant hot-spots such as the Farne Islands and Lindisfarne NNR, so it is easy to understand why the size of the annual report might reach 300 pages, as it did in the middle of the previous decade. Current editor Mike Richardson has worked hard on slimming down the report and improving its readability. With the main classified list section running at 185 pages followed by a 40-page reference section, he has made considerable progress.

The introduction is followed by a three-page monthly highlights summary before the report eases into the species-by-species classified list. Species accounts vary between a few sentences for a

single rarity to full-page analysis for some species. Clever dispersal of the chosen images, liberal doses of vignettes and sketches from a fine pool of local artists serve to break down the dryness that can occur in some annual reports.

The reference section opens with finders' accounts of the county's first Collared Flycatcher and second Cattle Egret. These bring personality to the report from contributors Gary Woodburn and Ian Kerr, and it's a shame that more local birding stories are not used to provide context and background to the species accounts.

Image quality is generally good, with excellent rarity contributions from the Farnes ranger team and some seriously good individual efforts from local birders, particularly Gary Woodbury's Ivory Gull and Jack Bucknall's Bluethroat. The numerous small sketches, field notes and the odd watercolour bring the report to life; John Steele's Common Eiders are worth the cover price alone!

BiN 2013 is a well-produced annual report packed full of data and detail, and also superb value.

Alan Tilmouth

More info

- *Field Guide to Invasive Plants and Animals in Britain* by Olaf Booy, Max Wade and Helen Roy (Bloomsbury, London, 2015).
- 304 pages, more than 1,000 colour photographs, 150 maps and line artworks.
- ISBN 9781408123188. Pbk, £24.99.

Birdwatch Bookshop
from
£21.99

More info

- *Birds in Northumbria 2013* edited by Mike Richardson (Northumberland and Tyneside Bird Club, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2015).
- 225 pages, numerous photos and sketches.
- Available from www.ntbc.org.uk for £10 plus p&p.

BOOKSHELF



A popular Radio 4 programme is given the book treatment, resulting in an excellent introduction to bird song, says **Heather O'Connor**.



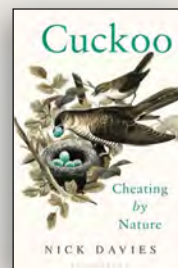
IF you're an early riser and a regular BBC Radio 4 listener, you will no doubt have caught *Tweet of the Day*, the two-minute programme in which a different bird song was played daily and accompanied by informative facts about the species.

Narrated by several well-known television presenters (Sir David Attenborough, Bill Oddie and Chris Packham, to name just a few), the series was originally aimed at showcasing

the range of almost 250 species of British birds within a short programme time slot – inspired by Twitter's form of communication via 140 character 'tweets'. However, as the series unfolded it evolved into much more, and insights emerged about the crucial part that birds play in our society and culture: through folklore, music, art and literature.

A handsomely presented title featuring beautiful prose and the charming illustrations of Carry Ackroyd, *Tweet of the Day* is based on the scripts of the beloved radio series, with the authors taking you month by month through the year, distilling two lifetimes' knowledge, insight and enthusiasm. As a celebration of one of the great wonders of the natural world it's a perfect introduction to bird song for the beginner, while the more experienced birder will be inspired by the carefully crafted accounts of the species featured.

This new title, plus the fascinating and engaging *Cuckoo: Cheating by Nature*, in which naturalist and scientist Nick Davies uncovers the extraordinary tricks cuckoos use to manipulate their hosts into raising their young, can be ordered online at www.birdwatch.co.uk/store or by using the form opposite. ■



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Based on the scripts of BBC Radio 4's beloved year-long series, and distilling two lifetimes' knowledge, insight and enthusiasm into its pages, the authors profile the changing lives of our favourite birds through the year. *Read our review on page 75.*



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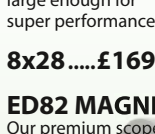
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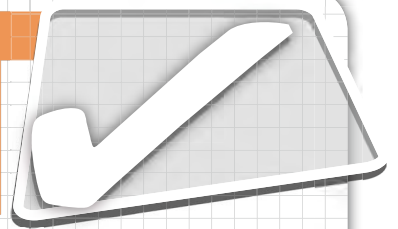


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EXPERT ADVICE



THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



DOMINIC MITCHELL is Birdwatch's founder and Managing Editor, and author and editor of several bird books. He has been birding for more than 40 years.



CHRIS HARBARD After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.



DAVID CALLAHAN Prior to joining Birdwatch as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



KEITH VINICOMBE has written several books and many articles and papers on identification. He is a past member of the Rarities Committee.



HEIN VAN GROUW is Curator of Birds at the Natural History Museum in Tring. He has a lifelong interest in colour mutations in birds.



MIKE LANGMAN is a full-time bird illustrator whose work has featured in numerous books, as well as at almost every RSPB reserve.

The best tips, advice and more
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82 How to ... Improve your sketching skills by testing them out on less familiar birds.

83 On song Learning to recognise bird song will add a new dimension to your birding.

84 Your questions answered Our panel of experts tackles more of your avian conundrums.

86 News Scotland's Big Nature Festival adds Bill Oddie to the line-up of guests.

87 Listcheck Further molecular evidence supports splitting Hen and Northern Harriers.

87 On the move Find out about the flyways that migrating birds use, and some impressive movements.

HOW TO ...

Protect nesting birds from pets

THE breeding season is well and truly in swing by May, with early migrants incubating eggs and some resident birds already feeding their first broods. Birds – especially nestlings – are particularly vulnerable at this time of year, and pets can cause huge amounts of damage. But there are ways to minimise this.

Dogs can have a real impact on ground-nesting birds such as terns, gulls and waders. A dog running loose through a breeding colony could destroy it in minutes. When people or dogs venture too close to a nesting site, the parents can flush, putting themselves between their eggs or chicks and what they perceive as a threat. That's when predators such as crows can swoop in and predate eggs or chicks.

The best thing is to avoid these areas entirely if you have a dog with you, but you should also ensure that your pet is kept on

a lead when on a beach or at a wetland. You never know when you might come across a nesting bird and it's too late to leash your dog after the disturbance.

Cats take tens of millions of birds every year, but this impact can be reduced. Keeping your cat indoors at all times is most effective, but this isn't always possible. There are other measures that can be taken, though.

Birds tend to be more active early and late in the day. Keeping your pet inside during these times will help protect birds. A collar with a bell will warn birds that a cat is around – a correctly fitted collar and bell can reduce cat predation by a third, according to RSPB research. You should also ensure that any feeders and nestboxes are positioned so that cats can't get to them.

With these simple tips you can help protect birds from your



Dogs might enjoy playing on the beach, but to protect birds during the breeding season it's best to keep pets on the lead.

pets – please share them with any other pet owners you know. The RSPB has further information

on keeping cats away from your garden birds here: bit.ly/bw275RSPBCats.

HOW TO ...

Make great field sketches

PART

3



SKETCHING a large or close bird in your back garden, using a notepad or paper of your choice, is very different from sketching in the field. For a start, the birds will probably be further away, so you'll have to use a pair of binoculars or telescope to see what you're drawing. Handling optics, notepad and pencil takes practice. Looking through a telescope is my preferred option as it leaves the hands free to hold the notebook and draw. A hide with a window shelf to rest a notepad on can make life easier for beginners.

Notebook size will be governed by your birding gear – I rarely carry a backpack so my notebook has to fit in a jacket pocket, meaning it will be about A6 size (usually about 15.5x13 cm) or perhaps a little larger. A smaller notebook means you have to consider how the sketch is going to fit on the page; the use of ovals will help with this process.

The type of pencil used is also important. Propelling pencils with HB leads of 0.7 or 0.9 mm are a great option. With these, if the lead breaks, a simple pump of the button on the top of the pencil means a new lead is ready. Traditional pencils require a sharpener (which soon blunts or goes rusty) or a penknife to keep it sharp. Also, if you drop the pencil, it will often fracture the entire lead inside, so that it breaks every time it is sharpened.

At this point, some birders will be ready to throw in the towel and claim it is all beyond them, but those who followed last month's advice (*Birdwatch* 274: 82) to focus their efforts on familiar birds will already know there is a positive improvement in speed, technique and observation every time a sketch is completed. The understanding of proportions using ovals to achieve a basic shape is something worth continuing; in time the use of these preliminary shapes might become unnecessary as it is possible to keep the shapes figuratively in mind while sketching the bird.

This month we'll look at species that are a little less familiar. If you feel combining

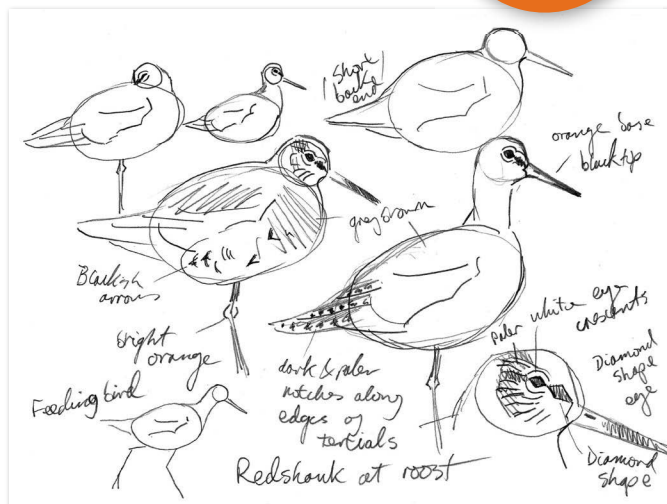
optical equipment with sketching is still too tricky, finding a reserve with a hide that offers numbers and variety of birds with relatively close observation would be a bonus, or try visiting a local park with ducks, geese, gulls and other waterfowl.

Having made the effort to venture out with creative intention, spend some time on one particular species or family. Compared to the birds in your garden – which will probably sit for a while at a feeder or bird table – your new subjects may move around a lot. If you struggle with the challenge, look for birds that are resting or even sleeping. After some more practice, you can step up a gear and tackle those moving birds. Make several sketches as the bird moves; start a new one, but return to the various sketches given the opportunity as the bird changes position.

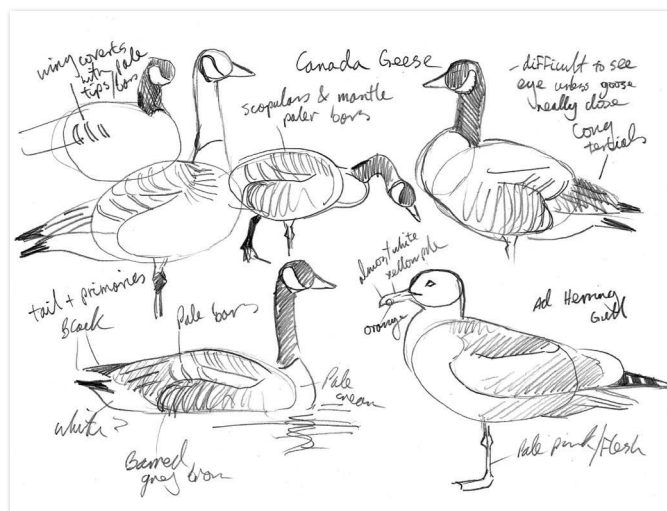
Remember to keep looking at your subject as much or even more than the sketch you are creating. Too many people take just a quick look at the subject and then spend far too much time staring at the sketch instead. Holding an image in your mind to put on paper takes practice and even for the best artists the immediacy of observation is hugely important. The more time you spend sketching rather than observing the subject means the more you are relying on your memory, together with its limitations in recall; observation is key to an accurate drawing. If you are not sure about a feature look again – don't make it up!

Now start looking at the plumage details and feather tracts. As birders we have all seen topographical illustrations depicted in field guides, but how many of us remember all of those terms or where they really are on the birds that we watch? This is a great opportunity to look hard at a bird and pay real attention to the parts you are looking at and drawing. You'll be surprised at how quickly your knowledge and interest in detail and plumage develops.

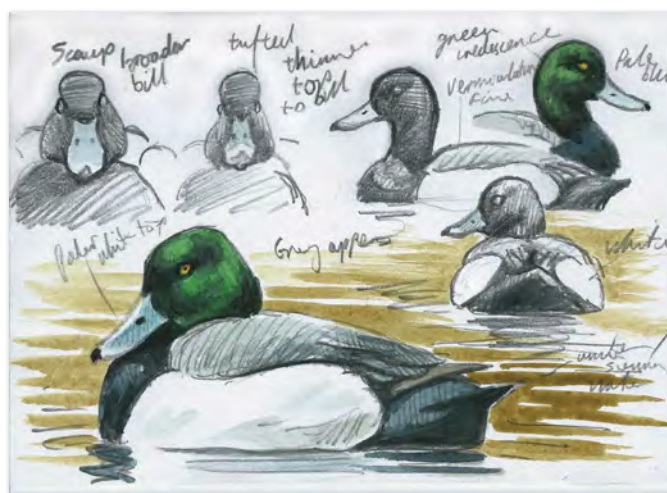
Next month: speeding it up – knowing feather tracts will improve your sketches and birding skills. ■



Common Redshank sketches: continue to use the oval guidelines (see last month's issue), but remember they are just that, and feel free to alter the body and head shape around the ovals.



Canada Geese and Herring Gull sketches: see how posture can change plumage features (for example, the shape of the Canada Goose's black neck shown here).



Drake Greater Scaup sketches: note field marks such as the differences in structure of head and bill in Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup. The watercolour was added immediately on returning home.

Unmissable bird songs



Nightingale is one of our most famous songsters. This secretive species is often hidden from view, so getting familiar with the song is a great way of recognising the bird.



MICHAEL DURHAM

SUMMER is on the way and many bird species are in song. Learning bird song adds an extra dimension to your birding and allows you to identify species that you haven't seen.

If you bird in different areas of the country, you may find differences in songs even between the same species, as many birds learn individual phrases which may be passed on to others in the area over time. When listening to a bird singing, try to remember any distinct features or phrases, or even record them. Here are a few bird songs to listen out for and try to recognise this summer.

European Nightjar

While not the most tuneful of songs, European Nightjar's unmistakable and extraordinary *churring* is now easier to hear in Britain following a range expansion and increase in numbers over the last 30 years. Most vocal as dusk falls, the species' wavering *churr* rises and falls, with 1,900 individual notes per minute, lasting for up to 10 minutes, and is audible up to 2 km away on a calm night.

European Turtle Dove

Once a common sound across England and Wales in the summer, the soft purring of European Turtle Dove is now hard to hear as its population has declined, with more than 90 per cent lost from Britain. When written as *turr turr* it is easy to see how the dove got its name. Arriving in Britain from late April, a warm, still May morning is the best time to listen for one.

Skylark

An inspiration to both poets and composers, Skylark's song is a beautiful outpouring of liquid, warbling notes given either in song flight or from the ground. Flying regularly up to 50 m in height, and sometimes as high as 100 m, the songs can last for several minutes, with most singing taking place in the morning. Some have repertoires of up to 460 syllables, often including mimicry of other bird species.

Nightingale

Although a perennial favourite, Nightingale can only be heard from April to June, and May is

one of the best months to listen for its loud liquid song, bursting forth from a bush. Sadly, it is now confined to an area south of a line from The Wash to the River Severn. The whistles and trills from this often hidden songster are not just heard at night but at any time, although most often around dawn and dusk.

Blackbird

In its purest form, Blackbird's song is full of mellow, fluting notes, all in a rich, well-paced warble, regarded by some as superior to that of Nightingale. Blackbirds are also good mimics and will pick up phrases from other birds as well as mechanical and other man-made noises. Phones ringing, car alarms and vehicle reversing noises are all commonly heard. An early riser, it is one of the first dawn chorus species to sing.

Blackcap

The warbling song of Blackcap has earned it the nickname 'northern Nightingale', as its rich melody can be heard across Britain well into Scotland. Starting with more chattering notes, the

introduction can include mimicry, and the song usually ends with fluting notes which can differ between regions, becoming dialects with one two-note phrase being particularly distinctive.

Linnet

The whistling, trilling song of Linnet made it highly sought after as a cagebird in Victorian times. Usually perched on top of a bush, the crimson-breasted male sings its twittering melody. Heard less often following the loss of half the British population during the 1970s and 1980s, it is still possible to find Linnets everywhere except upland regions.

Yellowhammer

The song of Yellowhammer is renowned for sounding like the phrase 'little-bit-of-bread-and-no-cheese'. Once a common countryside sound, it has become rare as Britain has lost more than 50 per cent of its Yellowhammers. Birds sing from the tops of hedges or from telephone wires, and as it is a resident species, regional accents have developed. ■

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED



Q Your *World of Birds* supplement (see *Birdwatch* 271, *Cruises for birding*) was very interesting. I have recently retired and taken up bird photography, which I find very demanding but fulfilling. I took these two images on a cruise to the Panama Canal and surrounding areas, and would appreciate your expertise in identifying these seabirds. Alex Porteous, West Lothian

A **Dominic Mitchell replies:** "Such close images of seabirds do indeed demonstrate the advantages of birding from cruise ships. Both your birds are boobies of the family Sulidae, mostly tropical species which occur in the region you visited. The largely white bird (above left) is a Masked Booby. Despite being photographed from above, the diagnostic dark face mask surrounding a mostly yellow bill can be made out, while the small white patch on the leading edge of the forewing and black-edged white tail can also be seen.

"Perhaps more obvious is the bird in the larger picture, which is a



Brown Booby. More precisely, the pinkish tinge to the beak and paler shade of brown of the body feathers indicate that this is may be a female of the Pacific population, though the image is somewhat over-exposed and it is hard to be absolutely certain about these features. Atlantic birds are darker and have a brighter yellow beak."



Q I was taking a picture of a Black Redstart in Newton-Le-Willows, Lancashire, on 18 February when this raptor (left) flew over. I assumed it was a Sparrowhawk, but another birder with more experience than me said it resembled a Goshawk in the way it flew and its size. Can you identify it for us? Gail Gannon, via email

A **David Callahan replies:** "Actually, this is an occasion where your 'less experienced' first instincts are correct – your bird is indeed a Sparrowhawk, rather than the rarer but frequently misidentified Goshawk.

"Though in semi-silhouette, the square-cornered long tail (longer than the width of the wing) with a narrow base and the relatively short wings with a pronounced curve on their trailing edge reveal its identity. It also looks to be a fairly slender bird, with a short neck and quite large-looking head. Ageing the bird isn't possible from this image, but it appears to be quite bulky and is therefore probably a female." ■

The Big Question: pink gulls

Q I have seen a number of Black-headed Gulls with very pink breasts; what is the cause of this? I've speculated that it may be diet related or perhaps hormonal? Is it likely that these birds are Scandinavian migrants, as I also identified a ringed Norwegian bird at the same location – Lurgan Park Lake, Co Armagh. *K B Kirkham-Brown, via email*

A *Hein van Grouw of the Natural History Museum Bird Group, Tring, replies:* “To be honest, much is still unclear regarding the pink colour in gulls. In the past it was thought that it was the birds’ green oil which coloured the feathers, but nowadays there are strong indications that it is the result of carotenoid pigments – astaxanthin to be precise – acquired via the birds’ food. However, why some individuals show this pink coloration and others don’t is not certain. It may be that some eat food which provides sufficient amounts of astaxanthin and others don’t. Or it may be physiological – that is, some birds can process and synthesise this pigment and others can’t.” ■



Pink-tinged Black-headed Gulls, such as this bird photographed on Texel, The Netherlands, are quite frequent among the huge flocks seen in Britain, too.

MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

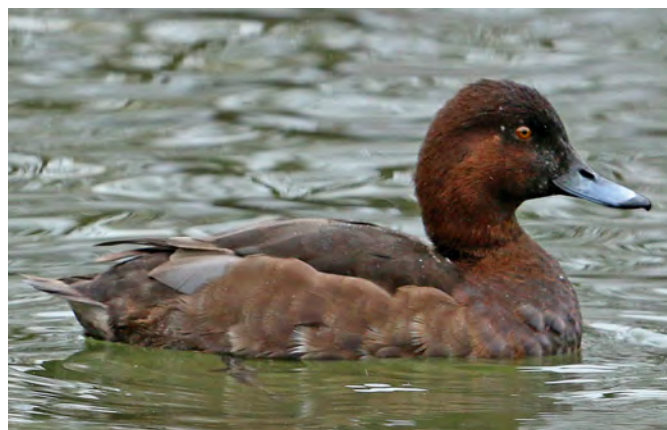
Birdwatch’s own local patch of Alexandra Park, in suburban north London, produces interesting birds from time to time. One recent example is this odd *Aythya* duck (right), found by Dominic Mitchell in mid-March and still present intermittently into April. It’s clearly a hybrid and one of several to have visited the park in recent years, but quite different to the Tufted Duck x Common Pochard crosses that have occurred previously.

So what are its likely parents? We asked ID Consultant Keith Vinicombe, a self-confessed ‘duckaholic’, to comment: “Whichever way you look at it, this is a pretty strange-looking *Aythya*. On the face of it, it appears to be a female, but there are no female *Aythya*s with red eyes. That being the case, I would say that (a) it has to be a male and (b) one of its parents must have been a Common Pochard (the only European *Aythya* in which males have red eyes).

“Turning to its plumage, the only *Aythya* likely to occur in Britain that has this kind of chestnut-tinged body plumage is Ferruginous Duck, and the whitish undertail coverts may indicate that one of its parents was this species. Its overall shape, particularly its rather rounded head, suggests the North American species Redhead, but head shape can vary considerably, depending on the bird’s mood and what it is doing. Male Redhead has a yellow eye, so that alone would eliminate that species.

“I would opt for a Common Pochard x Ferruginous Duck hybrid.

As well as the eye colour, the bill pattern suggests a male Common Pochard, as do the grey-coloured tertials and worn pale fringes to some of the flank feathers. Despite Ferruginous being a rare and declining species in Europe, this hybrid combination is surprisingly frequent in Britain. Presumably, as Ferruginous declines, it becomes increasingly desperate to find mates and will copulate with the ‘next best thing’. If the resulting hybrid offspring inherit Common Pochard’s westerly orientation to their autumn migration, they then end up in Britain. It is also possible that some of these hybrids originate in captivity, and so it’s always best to preface any suggested ID with the word ‘presumed’.” ■



DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

Q I’m not a birdwatcher but I keep an eye on the birds in my garden, which is situated near Lamorna, west Cornwall. I have sent you a photo of a bird I saw in February which I have never seen before (below). It may be nothing, who knows? *Peter Rhodes, via email*

A *David Callahan replies:* “Your garden bird is rather scarce in Britain and is a cracking male Black Redstart. A very localised breeder in the south and Midlands, the species winters in small numbers, mostly on southern coasts with a notable concentration in the West Country. It is thought likely that some of these birds are dispersing from the Continent, as there seem to be more than can be accounted for by the 100-200 British breeding pairs.” ■



Have you got a question for our experts?

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forums at www.birdwatch.co.uk/forums, or by
emailing editorial@birdwatch.co.uk or by writing

in to: **Your Questions Answered, Birdwatch, The Chocolate Factory, 5 Clarendon Road, London N22 6XJ.**

Bill Oddie heads Scottish Birdfair line-up

RSPB Scotland has announced that Bill Oddie will be attending Scotland's Big Nature Festival in East Lothian this month. The two-day event, which is run by the wildlife charity and includes the Scottish Birdfair, is being held on 23-24 May at the beautiful Musselburgh Lagoons.

Bill Oddie will be giving talks on both days in the specialist talks tent, which is dedicated to keen birders. He will also be hosting a book signing for his new collection, *Bill Oddie Unplucked: Columns, Blogs and Musings* (see our special offer on page 77).

Over the course of the weekend there will be a fantastic range of other talks from local and international speakers including Sir John Lister-Kaye, Dr Will Miles of Fair Isle Bird Observatory and Josep del Hoyo, co-author of the *Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World*. Visitors can learn

about some of the world's most threatened species including Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Emerald Starling and Ethiopian Bush Crow; find out about 60 years of work on long-distance migrants such as Pied Flycatcher and Lesser Whitethroat; and hear what it's like to work as a wildlife reporter from BBC presenter Euan McLlwraith.

RSPB Scotland and the British Trust for Ornithology's ever-popular ringing demonstration will return this year. You can see some of the species found at Musselburgh Lagoons close up, discover how and why birds are ringed, and the value this has in conservation.

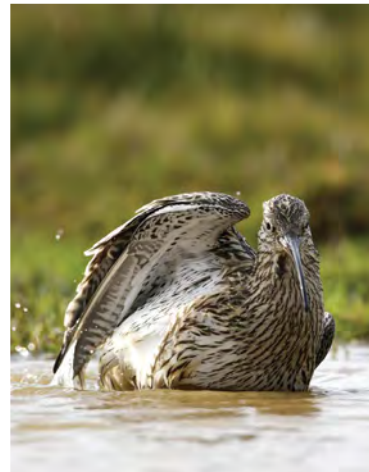
There will be a range of workshops including wildlife photography and raptor and wader ID, as well as guided walks to identify different species and their songs, or if you're just starting out, try birdwatching for beginners. Scotland's largest optics demo

can also be found at event, where you can shop for new kit and speak to leading optics suppliers.

The new venue is a designated SPA and SSSI which is teeming with wildlife including Eurasian Curlew, Oystercatcher, Sand Martin, Green and Wood Sandpipers, Blue Tit and Goldfinch. The site is a premier birding hot-spot managed by East Lothian Council, and is widely recognised as one of the best places in Scotland for birding.

Why not bring the whole family along? There will be lots to keep the kids entertained, from pond dipping and mini-beast hunts to bush crafts and puppet shows. With more than 100 exhibitors including a farmers' market, local artisan foods, a bar and live music, you'll find something for

everyone at this award-winning festival. For more information and to buy tickets go to www.scottishbirdfair.org.uk. ■



Eurasian Curlew is the subject of this year's conservation project.

ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



News round-up

MAIN STORY Blackpoll migration mystery solved

Scientists have shown that the suspected long-distance migration of Blackpoll Warblers over huge expanses of ocean does indeed take place every spring and autumn.

• bit.ly/bw275blackpoll

■ Ospreys to appear at T in the Park festival

RSPB Scotland has criticised the T in the Park music festival for potentially disturbing the wildlife at the site, including a pair of breeding Ospreys.

• bit.ly/bw275Tinthepark

■ Gull breeding success linked to human food waste

Research shows that the presence of open-air landfill sites directly correlates with the breeding success of Yellow-legged Gulls.

• bit.ly/bw275landfillgulls

In the digital edition

MAY'S digital edition has lots of bonus content, including:

- Movies, calls and songs of White-spotted and Red-spotted Bluethroats.
- Video of rarities and scarcities from across the region.
- Footage and songs of British breeding birds.
- Extra materials for many of the species featured throughout the magazine, including sound files and video.

The digital edition is available for PC, Mac, iPhone/iPad and Android. Sample editions are free, and subscriptions or single issues can be purchased. Visit www.pocketmags.com/birdwatch to find out more. ■

LISTCHECK

Updating avian taxonomy

All points harriers

THE full species status of the North American Northern Harrier *Circus (cyaneus) hudsonius* – once considered to be a subspecies of Hen Harrier *C. cyaneus* – has received further support in a new DNA analysis of the whole of the genus.

Northern Harrier is actually sister species to the South American Cinereous Harrier *C. cinereus*, and part of a separate lineage to Hen Harrier. African Marsh *C. ranivorus* and Marsh Harriers *C. aeruginosus* also emerged as sister species, while the separate specific status of Réunion *C. maillardi*, Malagasy *C. macroscelus* and Eastern Marsh Harriers *C. spilonotus* has also been upheld. ■



Reference

- Oatley, G, Simmons, R E, and Fuchs, J. 2015. A molecular phylogeny of the harriers (*Circus*, Accipitridae) indicate the role of long distance dispersal and migration in diversification. *Molecular Phylogenetics and Evolution*: doi:10.1016/j.ympev.2015.01.013.

Northern Harriers, like this female, may receive even more attention when they turn up in Britain, now their full species status seems to have been confirmed.



DAULDER (COMMONS:WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

Know your flyways

The Greenland form of Northern Wheatear makes one of the longest transoceanic crossings of any passerine. In spring it migrates from Africa via continental Europe, Britain and Iceland to Greenland.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

MIGRATING birds tend to follow traditional routes, and many of these lie along broad flyways which sweep between north and south. There are eight major migration flyways in the world, and Britain lies on the East Atlantic Flyway which funnels birds between their breeding grounds in Arctic regions of North America, Europe and Asia down to wintering areas as far south as southern Africa, passing largely through western Europe and north-west and west Africa. Many birds also take shorter journeys along this flyway.

The East Atlantic Flyway encompasses 45 million square km in 75 countries and is used by about 90 million migratory birds of 300 or so species, especially waterfowl and waders. Birds returning to breeding grounds via the far west sector of this flyway include Greenland White-fronted Geese, Light-bellied Brent Geese and the long-distance Greenland Wheatear, while heading furthest east are their equivalents: European White-fronted Geese, Dark-bellied Brent Geese and Scandinavian Northern Wheatears.

Many waterbirds using the East Atlantic Flyway follow a largely coastal route, stopping to refuel when necessary at estuaries and other wetlands along the way. Important sites include the Wadden Sea off the coasts of Germany, The Netherlands and Denmark which hosts 12 million birds, the Banc d'Arguin, Mauritania, which has 2.5 million waders in winter, and the Bijagos Archipelago in Guinea-Bissau with 1.5 million wintering birds.

Most of the waders that head north to their Arctic breeding grounds from winter areas in west Africa pass through western Europe in spring, looking splendid in their full breeding plumage. Watch out for treats like bright chestnut Curlew Sandpipers and Bar-tailed Godwits, black Spotted Redshanks, chestnut-and-black Turnstones and fabulous black-bellied Grey Plovers. Estuaries along the coast of Britain provide essential fuelling stations for many passage migrant waterbirds and shorebirds, as well as winter homes for others. Turnstones which winter in Britain will be heading back to Greenland and Arctic Canada in the spring. Sanderlings are particularly numerous in May on many west coast estuaries such as Morecambe Bay, and most of these will be heading for Iceland, Greenland and Arctic Canada.

Large-winged migrants such as storks, eagles and kites have precise crossing points across the Mediterranean between

Europe and Africa. The East Atlantic Flyway encompasses the Strait of Gibraltar, one of these special migration hot-spots. Radar studies have also shown that many nocturnal passerine migrants cross the strait in larger numbers than any other crossing points over the Mediterranean, especially in spring. One of these migrants will be the Greenland subspecies of Northern Wheatear which winters in west Africa and migrates up the coast of western Europe, through Britain, to Iceland and then on to Greenland, one of the longest ocean crossings of any passerine.

Passerines have largely been thought to cross the Mediterranean on a broad front, rather than through any special areas, but recent analysis of passerine migration suggest that Western Palearctic birds follow four main 'flyways' where the density of migrants passing through is at its highest: the East Atlantic Flyway, from western Russia, Scandinavia and western Europe down through Iberia into north Africa and then southwards; the Central (Apennine) Flyway from western Russia, Scandinavia and central Europe down through Italy into north Africa and then southwards; the South-eastern (Balkan) Flyway from Europe passing eastwards through the Middle East into Africa and then southwards; the Eastern (Indian) Flyway from eastern Europe and Central Asia into the Indian subcontinent.

For more information about flyways go to www.birdlife.org (East Atlantic Flyway) and www.atlanticflyway.org (Atlantic Flyway Network). Also see *The Ring* 36:3-21, viewable online at <http://doi.org/10.2478/ring-2014-0001>. ■

SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN MAY

Full moon date is Monday 4 May

	3rd	10th	17th	24th	31st
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	07.22	11.49	06.53	11.49	06.00
Devon	19.41	–	19.18	–	18.26
Poole Harbour (town quay)	09.29	01.43	09.14	01.43	08.26
Dorset	21.50	15.02	21.38	15.12	20.50
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	–	04.30	11.50	04.31	11.02
Hampshire	12.14	17.08	–	17.05	23.19
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	00.42	05.33	00.16	05.33	11.48
Kent	13.06	17.53	12.45	17.48	–
London Bridge	02.00	06.47	01.31	06.47	00.33
Greater London	14.24	19.07	14.02	19.02	13.04
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	00.21	05.04	–	05.04	11.29
Essex	12.45	17.27	12.23	17.23	23.43
Blakeney Harbour	07.06	11.53	06.36	11.54	05.57
Norfolk	19.20	–	18.57	–	18.12
Hunstanton	06.52	11.22	06.24	11.21	05.41
Norfolk	19.03	–	18.43	23.59	17.53
Blacktoft	07.12	11.57	06.42	11.58	06.01
Yorkshire	19.26	–	19.04	–	18.16

	3rd	10th	17th	24th	31st
Teessmouth	04.05	08.34	03.39	08.33	02.53
Durham/Yorkshire	16.15	21.19	15.57	21.15	15.04
Holy Island	02.48	07.20	02.19	07.19	01.30
Northumberland	15.04	19.56	14.44	19.52	13.50
Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	03.06	07.31	02.45	07.27	01.51
Lothian	15.18	20.15	15.05	20.08	14.03
Morecambe Bay	11.45	04.06	11.24	04.07	10.34
Lancashire	–	16.39	23.48	16.38	22.57
Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	11.23	03.44	10.59	03.46	10.13
Cheshire	23.42	16.18	23.24	16.18	22.36
Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	06.43	11.26	06.18	11.25	05.33
Carmarthenshire	19.00	23.55	18.42	23.50	17.52
Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	08.24	00.34	07.54	00.37	07.09
Gloucestershire	20.40	13.01	20.18	13.02	19.29
Belfast	11.27	03.59	11.06	03.49	10.12
Co Down	23.51	16.40	23.34	16.39	22.41
Dublin (North Wall)	–	04.29	11.49	04.26	10.50
Co Dublin	12.04	17.11	–	17.07	23.17



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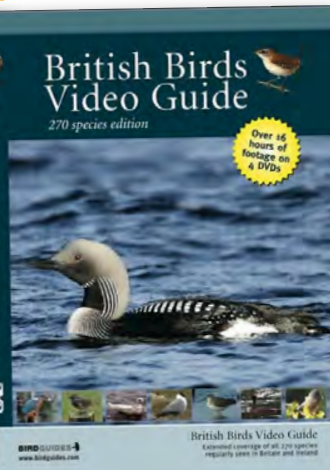
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LITTLE BITTERN BY MARC GUYT (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

■ **Here come the herons!** Increasing numbers of once-rare herons and egrets now arrive from continental Europe each spring to breed in Britain. From Little, Great and Cattle Egrets to Spoonbill, Purple Heron and Little Bittern, our wetlands have never had it so good. We profile the species and the hot-spots where you can see them this summer.

■ **Guardians of the rare** It's always exciting when a rare bird shows signs of nesting – news of last year's attempts by Black-winged Stilts to raise broods was eagerly awaited by thousands. But how do conservationists go about trying to ensure these endeavours are successful? The RSPB leads us through the trials and protocols of protecting rare breeding species.

■ **Which warbler?** A burst of 'reeling' song is likely to be the first you'll be aware of a Grasshopper Warbler on your patch. But would you know if it was a rarer Savi's or vagrant River Warbler? Andy Stoddart advises on how to separate this tricky *Locustella* trio by sight and sound.

■ **Birding on the edge** In the Ural Mountains on Europe's easternmost fringe, such highly desired species as Oriental Cuckoo, Black-throated Accentor and Siberian Rubythroat have a toehold breeding presence, while to the south the likes of Long-tailed Rosefinch and Red-headed Bunting offer further reason to venture into uncharted birding territory. Josh Jones goes exploring.

■ **Bill Oddie is back!** Bill's contributions to the magazine began in the early Nineties, and now he returns to his spiritual birding home for a new series of yarns, anecdotes and downright opinionated columns. Don't miss the return of Britain's best-known birder!

PLUS Subalpine Warblers, all of spring's rarity sightings and big stories, Western Palearctic round-up, news, views and reviews, Mark Avery's column and Steve Young's photo challenge, and all your birding questions answered by our team of experts.

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your letters & photos

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Drawing the birds in

I drew these Reed Buntings (left) after a pleasant winter's afternoon using my car as a hide at Rod's Log, Aust Warth, near Bristol, Somerset – where seed is put out to keep both buntings and birders happy – encouraged by Mike Langman's series in the magazine. I also drew this Golden Eagle head (below) from pictures on the internet.

I love seeing Mike's articles in *Birdwatch* – they're not only educational but inspiring, and I regularly pop down to Devon to see the stunning Cirl Buntings that Mike himself feeds at Broadsands.

Keep up the good work!

Craig Lewis, via email



Each spring, Gaz Lomas puts out the hair from his Cocker Spaniel Bob for birds to use as nesting material. This year it attracted this Great Tit. "They absolutely love it!" he said.



Martin Berry got lucky with this shot of mating Kingfishers in early March, when he had only just sat down in the hide at Rye Meads RSPB, Hertfordshire.

Wandering kites

I have just read the article on reintroductions in your March issue (see *Birdwatch* 273: 36-40), where it is stated that Red Kites were reintroduced into the Derwent Valley in Derbyshire. I would like to point out that it was actually the Derwent Valley area near Gateshead, Co Durham, where the kites were reintroduced.

I am a member of Friends of Red Kites, and I'm looking forward to starting the 2015 spring monitoring for breeding kites in the north-east of England. I am also a subscriber to your brilliant magazine.

David Gaffney, via email

Joys of retirement

On a recent visit to Gorleston-on-Sea, Norfolk, a rain shower led me to the public library, where I was able to browse through your magazine and was thrilled to read about the House Sparrows at Battersea Power Station (see *Birdwatch* 269: 62-64).

I'm new to Norfolk, having moved recently from Enfield, Greater London, so I know how dire the situation is concerning House Sparrow. There seemed to be none in the Green Park or Hampstead Heath areas, but here in Norfolk I have regular sightings.

After the rain ceased, I continued strolling and a skein of geese went over. I've seen the Peregrine Falcons at the Tate Modern in London, but seeing them in the beautiful setting of Norwich Cathedral is stunning (see *Birdwatch* 269: 6-7). Here in Great

Yarmouth, where I now live, a Peregrine nestbox is in place on St Nicholas Parish Church. Another favourite site is Winterton-on-Sea, where Little Terns breed and you might see Arctic Skua, Red-throated Diver and Black-tailed Godwits, along with Common Eider during migration, to mention but a few.

Norfolk is a lovely place for retirement, but it is a continuing joy just to see the House Sparrows.

Miss C France, Norfolk



THOMAS WILLIAM BARRETT (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

Present from on high

On a trip to Salzburg, Germany, in December, with the intention of visiting the Christmas markets and sightseeing in the snow (though there was none), we ended up in the cemetery of St Peter's Church in the middle of the Old Town. We looked up at the rock face towards the catacombs and – lo and behold – there was a Wallcreeper, and a lifer, too.

A very nice Christmas present!

Philip Wells, via email

Join the debate online

twitter

• Last month's article on the early days of twitching at Nancy's Cafe in Norfolk got a lot of readers tweeting:

@rothiemoon: "Whatever happened to all the log books?"
@johnnymacbird: "Golden years!" [Accompanying scan below.]



@Lleyn_Birding: "Great article about legendary twitchers' haunt Nancy's Cafe, Cley in new @BirdwatchExtra. Skint teen birding mate once rang in 'news' ... of an elusive "dowitcher" at Titchwell from village call box to scrounge lift with those exiting the premises #naughtyboy."

@canttmi73: "Great article in @BirdwatchExtra 'The twitcher diaries' Nancy's Cafe the good old days god how things have changed."

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• On the news that the breeding site of Bryan's Shearwater, once believed extinct, had been found about 620 miles south of Tokyo, Japan:

Val Smith: "Brilliant!"

Laurence Hawkings: "I guess Bryan will be wanting it back now."

Further news that The Ospreys have returned to Rutland Water excited a response:

David Kelly: "Fantastic news."

Maxine Tuffin: "That's fantastic news! He looks in good shape, too! Amazing birds."

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STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

The winner



MARCH'S photo challenge was to capture images of that ever-popular garden bird, Goldfinch.

Steve Young said: "As I expected, the Goldfinch challenge proved to be very popular and as befits one of our smartest-looking garden birds there were some very impressive entries.

"It came down to two images by the end of my judging process and I finally chose Malcolm Housden's stunning shot of a parent Goldfinch carefully feeding its chick. It's very different from most of the entries – common enough behaviour,

but something that you don't see an image of very often.

"His photo is nicely exposed within a very attractive setting and could only have been improved by the juvenile being side-on to the parent.

"Congratulations to Malcolm who wins *RSPB Migration Hotspots* by Tim Harris."

• Turn to page 72 to find out what is this month's photo challenge.



LUCY MCROBERT

Talking therapy

If we are to protect nature we need to raise public awareness, but the major conservation organisations are too focused on legislation and not on the simple art of conversation, says **Lucy McRobert**.

I did not grow up immersed in nature. I connected with wildlife well enough as a child, but I wasn't an enthusiast. I couldn't identify anything more than garden birds, conkers or well-known butterflies.

I lost even that awareness as soon as my 12th birthday hit: peer pressure at my school would have condemned an interest in natural history as unacceptable.

Now, working in conservation and mildly addicted to exploring wildlife, I am astounded by the lack of emphasis that is placed by some of our major conservation organisations on communications. I recently went to a workshop representing A Focus On Nature, the network for young nature conservationists, and all I heard from governmental agencies, NGOs and independents was an unforgivable over-confidence, a self-assured arrogance, relating to policy and legislation.

At the forefront of conservation is a century of tradition, which all but preaches: designate, protect, designate, protect. More laws and tighter restrictions are apparently what's needed if conservation is to be effective. When asked, is the 'carrot or stick approach preferable' in protecting local sites, we simply needed a bigger stick. One highly respected ex-Natural England employee claimed that when met with opposition to our conservation aims, we should simply force our ideas on people through legislation. Our critics are wrong, and must be told so.

The extinction factor

There is a shocking lack of acknowledgement of our own insignificance in the face of popular culture. A quarter of a million people a week in the UK read about the Kardashians in *Heat* magazine, but our 'leading paid-for wildlife magazine' reaches only 38,000 a month. The reality is that the wider public cares more about *X Factor* than extinction.

To most people, a love of nature is unusual. That is why I speak to everyone that I can about birding: not to be considered different, but so that it becomes normal. When watching European Serins in Essex in February, a fair few young families, complete with Staffordshire Bull Terriers, were politely



The main conservation organisations have a somewhat old-fashioned approach to communication. Maybe it's time to try some new messages.

“The reality is that the wider public cares more about *X Factor* than extinction”

interested in what we were doing – even taking a peek through the scope: breakthrough! Never underestimate the power of face-to-face engagement.

It goes back to the idea that conservation needs to stop being 'worthy' and get sexy. We won't save the Hen Harrier if no one knows what a Hen Harrier is. Some nature television and radio programming from the BBC does break through, but not much by *Top Gear* standards – maybe *Springwatch* presenter Martin Hughes-Games needs to punch a producer?

If so few people translate a love of feeding the birds (a postulated two-thirds of Britain) into conservation action, maybe it's not entirely society's fault. We must take some responsibility on our own shoulders.

I would love to see nature conservation organisations admit their own limitations, their over-reliance on policy and be prepared to try new messages that appeal to the ideals of modern British society. It's a standard campaigning tactic: don't try to change people's minds, instead try to mobilise their values. Our policies aren't bad. They're incredibly valuable and technically sound, but they fail to engage people's hearts and imaginations, and in turn they fail nature. ■

Lucy McRobert returns in the July issue.

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Track 1 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 20:20, 25 February 2010. Hooting of a male, with others hooting and giving excitement calls in the distance. Background: Natterjack Toad *Bufo calamita*.



Track 2 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 19:26, 25 February 2010. Hooting of a male, with quiet excitement calls of female changing into hooting from 0:14. Background: Natterjack Toad *Bufo Calamita*.



Track 3 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 23:23, 3 March 2010. The first call is half 'contact call' and half 'beckoning call'. After 0:17 there is a contact call, then the bird starts to hoot loudly. Contact calls play a role in close-range communication between pair members during the whole year. Beckoning calls are single notes similar to hooting but much quieter and usually shorter. They are used to reassure or appease. Contact and beckoning calls are often heard in association (Exo & Scherzinger 1989). Background: Barbary Dove *Streptopelia risoria*.



Track 4 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 02:40, 18 March 2012. A chorus of excitement calls involving at least six individuals, part of a five-minute 'Mexican wave'. Background: Southern Tree Frog *Hyla meridionalis* and Iberian Green Frog *Pelophylax perezi*.



Track 5 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 22:45, 6 March 2009. Aggressive song of at least four individuals. Background: Southern Tree Frog *Hyla meridionalis* and Iberian Green Frog *Pelophylax perezi*.



Track 6 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 22:25, 6 March 2009. Aggressive song of a pair, gradually giving way to excitement calls. Background: Southern Tree Frog *Hyla meridionalis* and Common Barn Owl *Tyto alba*.



Track 7 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Cabo Espichel, Sesimbra, Portugal, 06:00, 11 October 2010. Aggressive song at dawn in autumn. Background: the sea.



Track 8 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 21:57, 15 June 2009. Two-note alarm calls of an adult accompanying fledged juveniles. Background: Iberian Green Frog *Pelophylax perezi* and juvenile humans *Homo sapiens*.



Track 9 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Cabo Espichel, Sesimbra, Portugal, 06:32, 29 September 2009. Single-note alarm calls in autumn when surprised by recordist.



Track 10 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 06:05, 26 February 2010. Cackling in flight, then perched. Background: Red-legged Partridge *Alectoris rufa* and Woodlark *Lullula arborea*.



Track 11 Little Owl *Athene vidalii* Rosmaninhal, Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, 23:29, 5 March 2009. Calls of a pair perched on a lamppost, interacting with their neighbours. The most prominent sounds include hooting, alarm calls, aggressive song, beckoning calls and excitement calls. Background: Common Barn Owl *Tyto alba*.



Track 12 Cucumiau *Athene noctua* northern slopes of Mount Etna, Castiglione, Sicily, Italy, 20:20, 21 April 2007. Hooting of several males. Background: hooting and (from 0:22) *twiu* calls of a Eurasian Scops Owl *Otus Scops*.



Track 13 Cucumiau *Athene noctua* Malvagna, Sicily, Italy, 20:49, 23 March 2011. Hooting of a male.



Track 14 Cucumiau *Athene noctua noctua* Madzharovo, Haskovo, Bulgaria, 01:26, 26 June 2009. Hooting of a male. Background: Woodlark *Lullula arborea*.



Track 15 Cucumiau *Athene noctua lilith* Payamlı Koyu, Şanlıurfa, Turkey, 04:51, 17 June 2009. Hooting of a male. Background: domestic fowl *Gallus gallus domesticus*, See-see Partridge *Ammoperdix griseogularis*, Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, European Turtle Dove *S turtur*, Crested Lark *Galerida cristata* and Desert Finch *Rhodospiza obsoleta*.



Track 16 Cucumiau *Athene noctua glaux* Taroudant, Souss, Morocco, 23:54, 11 April 2010. Hooting of a male.



Track 17 Cucumiau *Athene noctua saharae* Oued Massa, Agadir, Morocco, 09:25, 6 April 2004. Hooting of a male. Background: Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto*, Common Bulbul *Pycnonotus barbatus*, Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*, Eurasian Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus scirpaceus*, Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*, European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis*, Common Linnet *Linaria cannabina*, European Greenfinch *Chloris chloris* and Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*.



Track 18 Cucumiau *Athene noctua* San Giovanni in Galdo, Molise, Italy, 18:58, 18 March 2011. Aggressive song and excitement calls of a pair. Background: Italian Tree Frog *Hyla intermedia*.



Track 19 Cucumiau *Athene noctua lilith* Kızılkuyu Şanlıurfa, Turkey, 05:10, 12 June 2009. Aggressive song and excitement calls of an adult. Background: Rock Dove *Columba livia*, Collared Dove *Streptopelia decaocto* and Barn Swallow *Hirundo rustica*.



Track 20 Cucumiau *Athene noctua glaux* El Kasbah, Aysir, Safi, Morocco, 21:46, 25 June 2010. Aggressive song of one adult, followed by excitement calls of another closer to the microphones.



Track 21 Cucumiau *Athene noctua saharae* Oued Massa, Agadir, Morocco, 09:18, 6 April 2004. Excitement calls and aggressive song of a pair. Background: Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*, Common Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis*, European Goldfinch *Carduelis carduelis* and Corn Bunting *Emberiza calandra*.



Track 22 Cucumiau *Athene noctua sarda* Sella del Diavolo, Cagliari, Sardinia, 19:37, 16 April 2009. Calls perhaps intermediate between hooting and excitement calls.

These bird sounds are excerpts from chapter 3 of **Undiscovered Owls** by Magnus Robb & The Sound Approach. See page 67 to order your copy at a special offer price – with extra savings for *Birdwatch* subscribers!